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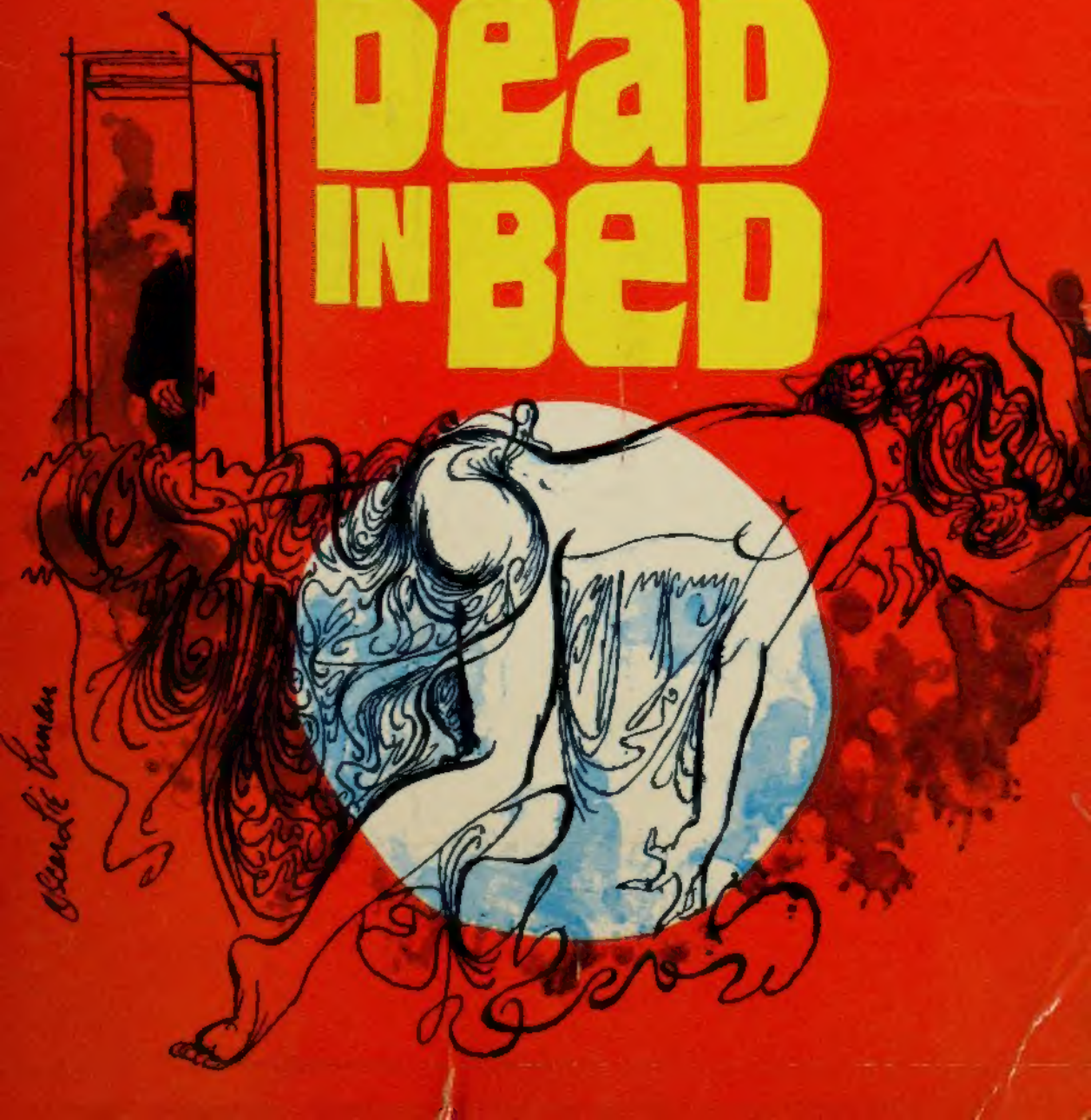
THE NEW PETER CHAMBERS MYSTERY BY HENRY KANE

DEAD IN BED



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I WENT TO THE BATHROOM. I PARTED THE CURTAINS, *after divesting myself of my pajamas, so that I could step into the tub in order to take my shower, but I did not step into the tub because, if I would have, I would have stepped upon the lady who was lying there. The lady did not belong in my tub. Nobody belonged.*

She had a good, long-legged, well-rounded figure, all of which I was able to observe because the lady was unencumbered by clothes. She lay nude, supine, inert, smiling wistfully. Both of us were naked but only one of us reacted—me. The lady was beyond reaction . . ."

DEAD IN BED

HENRY KANE

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ONE

AT NINE o'clock in the morning, on Friday June fifteenth, the telephone pealed and if ever a peal was unappealing that pitiless peal at nine A.M. was it. I had set my alarm for eleven which was bad enough—I had crumpled into bed at five—and I was tosspot-jealous of every tossing moment of slumber I had allotted to me. At first I thought it was the alarm but when the pried-open eyes finally focused and I saw the time, I knew it was the phone. The damned contrivance kept ringing like a toxic tocsin with a venomous clapper, but unremitting, and there was only one way to stop it. With a feeble curse at the shade of Alexander Graham Bell, I lurched across the bed and lifted the receiver. "Now what the hell?" I said to the mouthpiece.

An excited voice said: "Mr. Chambers! Mr. Chambers!"

"Yes, Mr. Chambers?" I mumbled. "What can I do for you?"

"No, no, I'm not Mr. Chambers. Are you?"

"Of course I'm Mr. Chambers. I *hope* I'm Mr. Chambers, Who's this?"

"Mr. Chambers?" he said.

"Christ, I thought we'd settled that. I'm Chambers, Peter Chambers. Now who're you and what do you want?"

"Gosh, I thought I'd got a wrong number or something. This is Jack Medford here."

"Oh no." My groan was brief but abysmal. "You got the right number, Jack, but you got the right number at the wrong time. Go back to sleep. Good-bye. Call later at a godly hour."

"Please! Please, Mr. Chambers! It's important!"

"Nothing is important at the crack of dawn—except sleep."

"Not the crack of dawn, sir. It's nine o'clock."

"To me, today, it's the crack of dawn, and if to me, today, the crack of dawn is at nine o'clock . . ." But rancor had receded. Maybe it was the "sir" that had done it. Maybe it was the urgency in his voice. Maybe it was because he was a nice kid who had had some rough going and with whom I sympathized. Or maybe

it was because willy-nilly sleep was shattered and I was awake. I said, "What's the matter, Jack?"

"Trouble, Mr. Chambers."

"Oh no not again."

"Not me, Mr. Chambers."

"Who?"

"My father."

"Your *father*?"

"I'll be right over, Mr. Chambers. I'll be there in ten minutes," And he hung up.

What are you going to do? Youth is impetuous and Jack Medford was an impetuous youth of twenty-three. He was also the son of an old and dear friend, Charles R. Medford, a widower since the boy was five, and Charles and I had bucked some stormy gales on behalf of young Jack during his turbulent surge through adolescence. Jack was out of college now, he was a sculptor, avant-garde and rather good, and, of course, selling nothing; he was supported but not spoiled, accurately and stringently, by his father. Jack had a studio at Fifty-seventh Street and Seventh Avenue and my apartment is on Central Park South near Sixth Avenue and Jack had said ten minutes and it would not be more, perhaps less. I clambered out of bed, lugubrious and hung, wondering what sort of fracas the boy and the father had got into this time.

I had been sleeping raw. I washed my teeth, combed my hair, and put on pajamas. I collected the clothes I had dropped at bedside and hung them away. I went to the living room for hair of the dog and hair of the dog tasted mangy. My tongue felt as though it were in the wrong mouth and there were cobwebs on my palate. It had been a wet night.

I had crawled the pubs with Alfred Surf who published books. I had been Alfred's guest because Alfred was bent upon soliciting my talents, such as they are, but before the night was over he was no longer bent, he was fractured, as was I. Alfred was selling me on the pros of the con. He wanted me to collaborate with one Barry Howard on a book to be titled *Confessions Of A Con Man.* He did not tell me too much. He sort of whet my appetite as he wet my whistle, wetting his own in the process, and when we had rolled into *The Brasserie* at four A.M. for scrambled eggs we were both as looped as a sailor's knot. We had an appointment for noon today at my office in order to discuss the project without benefit of alcoholic stimulus.

Now I had another shot of booze to straighten me away, shivered it down, and dragged feet to the kitchen for the preparation of

coffee. I had just poured it steaming black when the buzzer sounded. Cup clattering on saucer I opened the door for Jack Medford. "Come in, come in," I murmured sadly and he did and let the door slam which promoted further clattering of cup on saucer.

He was wearing jeans and a sweat shirt and still he looked like a romantic pirate out of folklore. He was tall and slender and dark with features as chiseled as one of his statues. He had black hair and black eyes, a restless muscular grace, the ease and intensity of a swashbuckler, and a jutting arrogant stubborn chin. He had a rolled-up newspaper wedged under one arm but because he was Jack Medford it appeared as a sword in the sheath of armpit.

"All right, destroyer of sleep," I said, "so you had another fight with you father about more money and now you come with your troubles to Uncle Peter."

"No. I don't need money. I've got all the money I need." The voice destroyed the illusion of the pirate. The voice was young and sweet and soft and kind: the voice gave off the flickers of insecurity which I, of all people. knew existed within him.

"All the money you need," I said. "How so? Have you got yourself a patron?"

"Yes I have."

"Somebody filthy rich? Somebody like Penelope Arlington?"

"Somebody exactly like Penelope Arlington."

"And who could be exactly like Penelope Arlington?"

"Penelope Arlington."

It figured. Penelope Arlington was easily old enough to be his mother and Penelope Arlington knew him since he was eight years old but he was grown now, young and virile and handsome, and Penelope Arlington had a trenchant penchant for men who were young and virile and handsome, and she could afford their services, or, better, to be serviced.

"Uncle Peter, at this crack of dawn," I said, "would be bored to distraction by tales of love no matter how aberrated or, for that matter, tales of tail no matter how aberrated. I've got my own love-life to live and I'm living it. Congratulations on the patron and I trust you're plumping to earn your keep, or should the word be pumping? Now why in hell did you wake me up?"

He drew his sword but did not point it. He unrolled it, flattened it, and extended it toward me. I gave him the coffee and took the newspaper. It was a morning tabloid opened to page three. He drank my coffee while I read his paper. My eyes were drawn to the

lead story because it had a picture of Charles R. Medford. The lead story was topped by the headline: BANKER EMBEZZLES $100,000. The opening paragraph stated: "Charles R. Medford, 48, Head of the Loan Department of the New York National Bank, 500 Fifth Avenue, went out to lunch at 12 o'clock noon yesterday carrying an attache case which, it is alleged, contained $100,000 in cash, and vanished. The loss was not ascertained until 3 o'clock yesterday at which time police were called in. The investigation was kept under wraps and the story did not break until 9 o'clock yesterday evening when Donald P. K. Sloan, President of New York National, called in reporters and made the announcement. Medford has disappeared without trace." The rest of the story was fill, but I read every word of it, learning nothing more pertinent than "police are investigating." When I was finished, Jack Medford was finished with my coffee.

"Crazy?" he said as he laid away cup and saucer.

"But crazy," I said. "Your father's no crook and we both know it."

"That's why I'm here," he said.

"Do you know anything about this?'

"Just what you read in the paper."

"Did the cops get to you?"

"Sure, but you know how I feel about cops."

"I don't give a damn *how* you feel about cops. They talked to you?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"When yesterday?"

"About eight o'clock."

"They waited until eight o'clock?"

"I didn't get back to the studio until eight o'clock. During the afternoon I was at the museum. At five o'clock I had a date with a gal for cocktails. I got back at eight and there was a detective waiting for me. He took me downtown and they questioned me till I was blue in the face but there wasn't a thing I could tell them."

"Did they check you out on that gal for cocktails?"

"What do *you* think? They even brought her in and gave *her* the old third degree. A real nice kid too. A poet—poetess I suppose she should be called. Her father's one of the most famous surgeons in this town."

"She corroborated?"

"Of course she corroborated. We were at the *Pierre* for cocktails and chatter. After a while, they let her go. After a while, they let me go too."

"What time was that?"

"Eleven o'clock. That's when I called you, right after I got out of that damned station house. I kept calling you till about four. Then I figured I'd pass it until this morning."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah." I went to the kitchen, poured more coffee, and came back to him. I found a cigarette, lit up, sipped and smoked. "Do you have any ideas on this?" I said.

"Nothing, except something must be way out cockeyed."

"Your father's no crook."

"We're unanimous on that, Mr. Chambers."

I smoked. I sipped. I said, "When did you see him last?"

"Wednesday. Wednesday evening. We had a date for dinner. He came over to the studio. We went over to *Whytes* for a fish dinner. Then we came back to the studio and sat around talking."

"Any special subject?"

He sat down. He crossed his long legs. "Penelope Arlington," he said. "He had learned about it and he disapproved."

"Why?"

He sighed. His face was very young, and very worried. "According to him, he disapproved of the fact that she was my patron, that she was giving me money."

"And according to you?"

"I think it was much more complex than that. You know as well as I that years ago he had had an affair with Penelope. Sure, now, they're friends, good friends, and all the rest of that crap, but it's my opinion that he was disturbed by the fact that the son was following the father, you know what I mean."

"Yes I think I do. And did you two have one of your famous battles?"

"No. It was all man-to-man mature-type talk." He stirred suddenly, slapped his knees, stood up, paced. "Mr. Chambers, I think you know how I feel about my father. We might fight like hell but I love the old son of a bitch, I'd die for him. This thing has got me worried, it's got me nuts, I wasn't able to sleep a wink all night. My father *couldn't* steal."

"I agree. Absolutely."

"This thing is some kind of weird mistake or else—it's a dame. You know my dad. He's always been a hot guy for the chicks. You know that as well as I do, maybe better."

"Let's say . . . as well as you do. Has there been a new one recently?"

"Yes."

"What name?"

"How the hell would I know? My father doesn't confide in me."

"But it seems that you *do* know."

"Penelope told me. He met her at a party at Penelope's."

"When?"

"A couple-three months ago or so."

"Did you mention any of this to the cops?"

"You know my opinion of cops. The answer to your question is no."

"Did they ask?"

"Whatever they asked, I answered. I volunteered nothing. They asked me if my father had ever remarried. I said no. They asked me if I knew the names of any of his girl friends and I gave them the names of any girl friends I knew. They did *not* ask me if I did *not* know the names of any of his girl friends—and so there was no mention of this latest flame."

"Well, that shouldn't be too hard for us to find out, should it?" I started for the phone but he stopped me.

"No good," he said. "Penelope's out of town, spending a week in the country. She's due back this afternoon. As a matter of fact. I've a date to call on her this afternoon at five-thirty."

"Good enough," I said. "Then at five-thirty this afternoon you'll find out the name of the dame. How come you never asked her before?"

"It was none of my business. Penelope mentioned it once or twice and that was that. She may not even *know* the gal's name. You know how it is with Penelope's parties, all sorts of people, a lot of them she hardly knows."

"For whatever it's worth, you'll find out at five-thirty."

"You bet I will."

"Fine. Now get the hell out of here so that I can begin taking up the slack."

"Like how?"

"Like having my breakfast and getting dressed and going down to the bank and finding out what this is all about."

He grabbed one hand of mine in both of his and squeezed. "Thank you, Mr. Chambers."

"Cut it out." I pulled free. "What's to thank me? Your father's been a friend of mine since you were a wild schoolboy trying to

get your stripes as a juvenile delinquent."

"That's all past now."

"I'm sure it is. Now get out of here, kid. Where'll you be?"

"At my studio until I hear from you."

"You'll hear. Now clear."

"Thank you again, Mr. Chambers."

"Good-bye, boy."

I saw him out and went to the kitchen and ate my breakfast. Hangover had been nipped by news from a tabloid. The dust was out of my brain and slumber was out of my bones. I had been a good boy all week, with plenty of sleep, and five hours is enough for any man with an emergency on his mind. I shook my head over the last cup of coffee as I reread the item on page three. It was wild, it was impossible, it was too far-out. There had to be some logical explanation, or illogical explanation, but whatever the explanation it would have to exonerate Charles R. Medford because Charles R. Medford, simply, was not a thief. The police might not buy that but I bought it because I was a friend and if a friend does not know who the hell does? Charles R. Medford was not a crook but according to page three he was sure in a jam. Well, hell, I wasn't a private richard for nothing and if I couldn't unjam a friend then it was time I turned in my license and became a politician or something similarly important such as chicken-flicker. First step was to get to the source and the source was the bank but there were a couple of small but necessary steps prior to that such as a shower and a shave. I went to the bathroom.

I live in an old and stately apartment house with large rooms and high ceilings and no stall showers, built long before I was born. Since I was born more modern apartment house have been erected *with* stall showers but frequently the only way to differentiate between the rooms for living and the stalls for shower is to look up to the ceiling for the shower-head. My bathroom contains a large tub and the shower is part of the bathtub and there are shower-curtains hung on a bar by curtain-rings and the shower-curtains are closed for decor when the shower is not in use and closed when the shower is in use in order that water does not splash the tiles of the floor. I parted the curtains, after divesting myself of my pajamas, so that I could step into the tub in order to take my shower, but I did not step into the tub because, if I would have, I would have stepped upon the lady who was lying there. The lady did not belong in my tub. Nobody belonged.

She had a good, long-legged, well-rounded figure, all of which I was able to observe because the lady was unencumbered by clothes.

She lay nude, supine, inert, smiling wistfully. Both of us were naked but only one of us reacted—me. The lady was beyond reaction. I kneeled and touched her. She was cold and rigid. I did no further examination. I stood up, closed the shower-curtains, and trotted to the living room where I put through a call for Detective-lieutenant Parker of Homicide.

TWO

I WAS ACQUAINTED with the lady who lay in my bathtub but did not belong. Her name was Angelina Pisk. She was a waitress now living in unwedlock with a bartender who had left but not divorced his wife. About five years ago she had been the prosecution's star witness in a proceeding entitled The State of New York versus Hockin Chynik. I had been responsible for the production of the prosecution's star witness thereby incurring the enmity of the loutish Mr. Chynik which enmity of course is the equivalent of a badge of merit. My collision with Chynik had been engineered by an insurance company.

Hockin Chynik, up until six years ago, had been a flourishing burglar. Six years ago, during one three-month spree he had looted apartments on the fashionable East Side to the tune of four hundred thousand dollars worth of jewelry—he specialized in baubles—and one insurance company, Hudson of America, had been socked the hardest for those purloined rocks: it had paid out close to two hundred and fifty thousand bucks in reluctant coin of the realm. Hudson of America had called me in and Mr. Archibold Finch, Executive Manager, had stated flatly, "Something's got to be done."

"Yes sir, Mr. Finch, it sure has."

"This is the work of one guy, no question."

"How do you know, Mr. Finch?"

His nostrils had expanded angrily. "Well you're a detective. Guess!" He was taking out his exasperation on me but he was also going to take out a large fee in short order, so I held still for it.

Meekly I had mumbled: *"Modus operandi."*

"Correct you are, my dear Chambers. *Modus operandi.* Precisely. The son of a bitch operates in one fashion. First, he enters by the front door. No bell ringing, no phony delivery of a package, no subterfuge to gain entrance. He's an expert with keys or with a picklock; whatever, he's a magician with locks; he simply opens the door and enters. Second, he works only in the afternoon. Third,

he's strictly a jewel-man and quite a connoisseur: takes the good stuff and rejects the poor. Fourth, he picks only such people who own valuable jewelry. Fifth, he wears a stocking mask over his head—"

"But how do you know?"

"Let me finish."

"Yes sir," I had said but if I was going to take on the assignment the fee would have to be double of what I already had in mind because Mr. Finch, although dedicated, was nasty, and the nasty client pays double the fee of the pleasant client—that's Rule Number One of the Sleuth Guild.

"Where was I," he had said, "before you interrupted?"

"You were up to: 'Fifth, he wears a stocking mask.' "

"Sixth, he's a big broad-shouldered heavy-set guy. And seventh, he uses black tape in emergencies. That's how we know, Mr. Chambers, that one specific son of a bitch has been pulling these jobs."

"Thank you, Mr. Finch, but now, if you please, how do you know about the mask, the heavy-set, and the black tape?"

"Because we have a full sheaf of reports," had twittered the Finch. "He enters the apartment and if there's nobody home he does his job and there's no trace. Remember, he works afternoons, and *if there is somebody home,* it generally is not the man of the house. He enters and he prowls. If there's anybody home, a woman, a servant, he renders them *hors de combat* by a swift judo swipe. Then he tapes wrists, ankles, eyes, and mouth with black tape and puts them out of the way."

Nastiness works two ways. "You left out number eight, Mr. Finch—that he's a judo-man."

"Admitted. I left out number eight. He's a judo-man. But you'll see all our papers, all our reports, so it wasn't a fatal ommission."

"What about the cops?"

"The police, of course, have been working like all hell on this, spurred of course by our pressures and the pressures of the other insurance companies. So far, no luck. That's why we're trying our luck once again with you. Thus far the orthodox methods of the police have been without avail. Perhaps your . . . your unorthodox methods will once again be succesful."

"Well thank you," I had said and stated my fee and he had almost toppled out of his swivel chair but Hudson of America must have been very anxious for my particular type of unorthodox snooping because they paid through the corporate nose whilst smiling politely with the corporate teeth. However, if you please,

do not underestimate the corporate mind. I had done work before for Hudson of America and Hudson of America had got its money's worth and all the executives including my Finch damned well knew it.

The Finch had not tweeted incorrectly. Certainly the private operator is not hamstrung by departmental rules as is the public operator. I had quite a lot to go on and sundry sources to go to. I was looking for a heavy-set burglar who was an expert on jewels. I was looking for a front-door man who was great on locks. I was looking for a guy who definitely had a fingerman because he hit specific spots rather than breaking in at random. He had been seen by the people whom he had smacked and taped and my first move was to interview all of them. I got no further descriptions from any of them since he was always in stocking mask but all of them agreed that he was somewhat over six feet tall.

I had gone to private sources, to people in the coterie, to the fences who handled hot ice—people who knew me and trusted me—and I had finally got a line on a Canadian crook who had hit New York a year before, a big bruiser, a front-door man, and a guy with a sparkling appreciation for precious stones. He was of Danish descent, his name was Hockin Chynik, he lived high off the hog, and he traveled with a pretty girl friend. I learned of his haunts and I started to haunt them.

It took three weeks of sitting around in pubs, clubs, saloons, and jazz joints—spreading around Hudson of America's expense money—before he was finally pointed out to me. The maitre d' at *Eden Roc* touched my elbow and said, "That's the fella you've been asking about. The party of three that Alex is leading to a table. Mr. Chynik is the big guy."

There was a big guy, there was a black-haired gal, and there was a tall slim blond guy. I did not know the big guy and I did not know the black-haired gal but I did know the tall slim blond guy and that was the first break in the subsequent apprehension of Hockin Chynik.

It was ten o'clock in the evening and they ordered drinks and then dinner. I took an out of the way table, but not too far out of the way, and also ordered drinks and dinner. Once when Mr. Chynik went to the men's room I went to the men's room with him and we jostled one another at the urinals. As he washed up before the bright mirrors I was able to study him. He had a face as miscellaneous as a trash basket at the United Nations. One eye was brown, one eye was blue, and his eyebrows were white. His hair was white, close-cropped, and balding at the middle, but he

was not old. He was about forty. He had a broken nose and a mustache, a black mustache, and the sheen on the clean-shaven cheeks was blue-black. There are men like that, white on top and black on bottom, white of hair on head and eyebrows and black on the bristles of the face. He was about six-feet-one with wide shoulders and powerful hands the nails of which were highly manicured. He was stylishly and expensively dressed and he wore a star sapphire on his left pinky. I quit the men's room before he did.

Over duckling with orange sauce at my table, I studied the gal. She had black hair, brown eyes, good shoulders, and nice breasts, period. I did not have to study the tall slim blond guy. I had studied the tall slim blond guy before. He was handsome, his name was Michael Peabody, and he was known amongst the cognoscenti as Mike the Pea. At that time Mike the Pea was twenty-three and he had never done an honest day's work in his life.

Mike the Pea was tall, strong, dashing, beautiful, and a doll with the dames. He had a ruddy complexion, large blue guileless eyes, long eyelashes, curly blond hair, a romantic nose, a manly profile, and all the larceny that could be stuffed into one human being. He was an orphan. His father had died in Alcatraz and his mother had been shot to death in a roundup of dope-pushers selling narcotics to teenagers; one could say that Michael Peabody was of the criminal elite, an aristocrat of iniquity by inherited title: sort of to the manure born. He thrived on dissolute desolate rich women, blackmailed elderly impotent men, stole from people who were ashamed to report to the authorities, and was the life of many parties to which he supplied whores for orgies, pornographic film for home movies, and circuses of degenerates for at home theatre-in-the-round as contrasted to at home theatre-for-the-squares. Naturally he moved in the best of wealthy circles and if Hockin Chynik was the burglar I was seeking then certainly Mike the Pea was his fingerman. That was my hunch over duckling with orange sauce but hunches need proof before being converted to evidence, and that became my job.

Mike the Pea ate quickly and then cut out. Hockin Chynik and gal lingered longer and then made the rounds with me as their tail. They hit, in liquid succession, *Birdland, The Roundtable, The Stork, The Harwyn, Chez Vito,* and then *El Barracho* on Fifty-third Street. They came to *El Barracho* at three o'clock but there they did not do their blotting up sitting down as they had done in the other spots, they attended the bar and were served by Maximilian Bartlett, as handsome a man behind the stick as any saloon

in New York could yield, a lean-flanked, big-shouldered, flashing-eyed buckeroo with a well-earned reputation as a gallant with the gals.

I kept my distance and observed but one did not need to be a trained observer to understand that the couple were at the bar under the subtle persuasions of the lady: the chick and Max had eyes for one another, large eyes. Hockin Chynik was a heavy drinker and heavy drinking prompts frequent visits to the toilet but, each time, no sooner was he engulfed in the first flush of the gent's room then Max and the lady were touching fingers, whispering avidly, breathing hotly, and eating each other up with their eyes. Something was cooking and the broth could do me no harm, could in fact do me a hell of a lot of good.

At closing time Harvey Rosen, the working boss, called merrily, "Last call for alcohol," and Hockin Chynik packed up, paid his tab, took his baggage and departed but I remained. Bartenders, of necessity, do their drinking after hours and Maximilian Bartlett this night was to be my guest. We journeyed together to an after-hours joint in Harlem where I belted him with whiskey and sustained camaraderie and then began pecking at his personal life. "You back with the missus?" I inquired.

"You nuts? Separated, once and for all and forever."

"If you need a divorce lawyer, I can get you a good one, and at reduced rates which he'll do for me special because he owes me a few favors."

"Thanks, Mr. Chambers, but I don't need no divorce lawyer because me and the missus we don't believe in divorce. Separated suits us fine, both of us."

"Don't you ever want to get married again, Max?"

"Who needs it? Once is enough."

"Not even if you fall in love?"

"What's falling in love got to do with it? If you fall in love, you shack with the dame, live with the dame. Like that you're on top and you stay on top as long as you don't get married. Once married, it flips over, and the broad is on top."

"That's quite a philosophy."

"Maybe to you it's philosphy; to me it's the truth. I learned my lesson the hard way but nobody can never say Maxie Bartlett don't learn once he does learn his lesson."

"Shacking," I said, "but living, no."

"What the hell you talking about, Mr. Chambers?"

"I mean, *this* dame you're not living with, Maxie. Don't kid me."

"*Which* dame?" He squinted at me.

"That black-eyed beauty at the bar tonight. The one you've got the hots for."

"And how would *you* know I got the hots?"

"You were erupting lava all over the bar. Maybe you're a great lover, Maxie, but a great actor you're not. What I mean—if you were trying to hide the hots, you were far from cool, man."

He grinned uncomfortably. "And how would *you* know that it's shacking, not living?"

"Because the guy she was with is doing the living, I'd bet on that."

Sourly he said, "You win your bet."

"What's her name, Max?"

"Angelina Pisk."

"She's traveling in bad company, Max."

"Now how in hell would you know *that?*"

"Remember me? I'm in the business of knowing things. Now let's get squared away, Maxie. Do you go for this chick?"

"I'm out of my brains for her."

"Then you'd better get her away from the guy."

"I wish I could. I can't."

"Why not?"

"She won't go."

"Why not?"

"He's a rough customer. He can be trouble."

"Then why doesn't she turn the trouble on him?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Maxie, boy, do you happen to know what he does for a living?"

"I do," he said. "Do you?"

I popped all my guns in one volley. "He's a *goniff*, Maxie, a grand larceny *goniff*, but he's all washed up only he doesn't know it yet. The cops have got him glommed and his next job is his last and when he gets sent away it's my hunch your black-eyed beauty is going to get sent along with him. Now I hate to see a chick get it and I hate it worse when the chick is a friend of a friend of mine and you're a friend of mine, Maxie. So, while there's still time, let's you and I pull her off free. You know? Let's do a good turn for everybody, including you. Are you reading me, kid?"

I had popped all my guns but I did not know whether I had a target. I sat back and hoped while sprayed by the gush of Maxie's silence. I waved for more drinks and continued hoping while Maxie hoisted a couple of whiskies aboard. Then he sighed and said softly, deliciously, encouragingly: "How do you know all this, Mr.

Chambers?" Oh I had a target, all right. Maxie was breaking out all over in a rash of bull's-eyes.

"I'm working for an insurance company and I'm working with the cops," I said. "We're interested in Mr. Hockin Chynik and company. Company is the black-eyed chicken, but I can persuade my cohorts to lay off the chicken if the chicken plays ball. Will she play, Maxie?"

Vehemently he said, "You bet your ass she'll play, Mr. Chambers."

"Can I have the story, pal?"

"I'm going to lay it on the line right now, Mr. Chambers."

It was the old story, always new. Angelina Pisk had been a waitress in a class restaurant of which Hockin Chynik had been a patron. She had a shape, a wriggle, sex appeal, and a desire to better herself, and Hockin Chynik had an appreciation of the sum total of all that. There had been the usual flirtation but he had shown her more money than she had ever seen in her life. She had given up her job and given in to him. They had shacked up as husband and wife in a tony apartment on East Ninetieth Street. She had worn new clothes, new furs, new jewels, new perfumes, but she had also worn new bruises inflicted by her benefactor because he was a brutal man. He had inspired fear in her and his knowledge of that fear had served as basis for her promotion from bed-companion to bed-companion-and-burglar-lookout and Hockin Chynik had intelligently proceeded to instill further fear on top of the initial fear. She had acted, all unwittingly, as lookout on one of his early jobs, but he had then informed her that she had been an accomplice in a burglary and if she talked she would be considered just as guilty as he and would wind up doing a stretch in the can. She was stupid and the stupid are prone to intimidation, and thereafter Hockin Chynik had a trusted accomplice. She had loitered outside whatever apartment he entered in order to stave off any unexpected intruder and warn Chynik inside by means of a prearranged bell-signal. After the job was accomplished he would transfer the loot to her handbag (precious baubles make small bundles); in the event of any untoward confrontation it was the plan that he would engage the interrogator in conversation while she slipped off into the motley anonymity of the city streets. There had never been any such confrontation and the Chynik-Pisk combination had sung a melodious duet of uninterrupted success except that Hockin Chynik was tone-deaf to certain off-key notes of his coerced coloratura: she was unwilling, she was frightened, she was pricked by conscience, and she would have blabbed her fool head off had she

not been constrained by the natural dread of the possibility of incarceration for a couple of years in the pokey.

In time she had been met and conquered by the dazzling Max although perforce our Maximilian had to do his conquering on stolen afternoons upon a quivering mattress in a seedy hotel in the mid-Forties: but she had confessed her naughty niceties to her palpitating partner and now they both lived in fear of her possible sequestration in penal solitude: and then Peter Chambers after hours in Harlem suddenly took on the stature of succor in the scrambled love life of the doughty Maxie and the naughty Angie.

"Mr. Chambers," said Maxie, "I know you a long time and I know you can be trusted a hunnert percent. You guarantee to me that she gets like immunity and I'll guarantee to you that she'll sing you the prettiest song you ever heard in your life. She's been busting to sing but she's been afraid of the law. You know the law. Even if they slam the book at him, they figure to throw a few pages at her, and she don't want no few pages, she don't want nothing, she's scared shitless of the can, she's got like claustrophobia, you know?"

"I know."

"You give me the guarantee, you got a deal."

"You've got the guarantee, Maxie, but remember they'll certainly want her to take the stand as State's witness."

"Oh sure fine—but there's got to be a deal that she don't do no time."

We shook hands on that. "When can you have her at my office?" I asked.

"Tomorrow afternoon. The boy-friend's going out to the track on a sure-thing in the sixth race. She's supposed to go with him but she'll cop a plea that she's sick. How about tomorrow one o'clock?"

"Don't fail me, Max."

He hadn't failed me. She had told me substantially the same story that he had, with one additional gambit. There was a finger-man named Mike the Pea; she was able to describe him but she did not know him by any other name. She had informed me that some of the unfenced ice was still at the apartment and we went back there for a look-see (it was safe because Chynik was at the track on his sure-thing). I had a list of some of the stolen jewels and when I examined the stuff I knew that Hockin Chynik was our man. I thanked her and told her that she had nothing further to do—just continue in the uneven tenor of her ways— until she heard from me.

Then I had hightailed it to Finch and had ruffled his feathers. He was all for moving in at once but I talked him out of that. Possession of stolen goods was something but it wasn't enough: I preferred we caught up with Hockin Chynik on the whole deal, caught up with him redhanded. Finch went with me to the District Attorney and we laid out a plan (I made no mention of Mike the Pea either to Finch or the D.A.). Our plan had three parts, as follows. One, if the girl turned State's evidence and cooperated there would be no press of charge and she would be granted immunity. Two, four of the D.A.'s investigators were to be assigned to me and ready for action whenever I called. And three, it was my job to discover Chynik's next job and blow the whistle on him. The District Attorney wanted to know how I intended to accomplish that last and, although I was polite, I told him to mind his business while I minded mine. The D.A. added two provisions: one, that I accomplish my end within thirty days and, two, that he put a couple of men on Hockin Chynik around the clock. That was our deal with everybody smiling especially Finch, and then I took off for Mike the Pea.

He lived in the *Hotel Brittany,* Suite 606, on West Eighth Street in Greenwich Village. Even in those days he was a smart cookie who knew on what side he was buttered. Up until then he had avoided entanglement with the law and he hoped to continue disentangled. He was a rough kid with a quick temper and a fast man with a blade. It was known that he had cut up a few people and it was suspected that he had murederd a few people but he had never as much as been arrested. Now I laid out my story line and quickly he jumped over to my side.

"I'll see to it that the girl omits any reference to you," I said, "but from here on out you're going to be the fingerman—for me! But first, let's hear the deal, and I want the whole *megilla.*"

It was simple. He was the fingerman for twenty percent of the proceeds of the loot and naturally he was certain he was being cheated. His end of the job was to spot a fancy dame sparkling with fancy rocks in one of the fancy clubs he frequented. He was to find out who she was, where she lived, and with whom. He would pass on his information to Chynik, Chynik would do his own surveillance for a while, and then hit.

"The cops are on him right now," I said. "If you want to stay clear, you've got to earn it."

"Like how?"

"I want to know who's scheduled for the next hit; how, when, where, the works."

There was nothing slow about Mike the Pea. "Mrs. Jennifer Moore," he said. "Four-forty-four East Fifty-fourth, apartment 4 B. Her husband is a stockbroker, there are no kids, and there's a personal maid whose day off is Thursday. The hit is set for this coming Thursday. Remember your promise to keep me clean. That goes for the coppers but that goes for Chynik too, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Anything else I can do?"

"I'd advise you get out of town for a while."

"I intend to do just that. Thanks for the advice anyway. You're a nice guy, Mr. Chambers."

"Nuts," I said. "Now I'm nice because now I can use you. Another time I'll knock you flat on your ass and make you like it."

"And vice versa," he said.

"Would you care for a little preliminary rehearsal right now?"

"I'd care, but I'd be stupid to make you mad at me in the middle of your doing me a good turn."

"You're doing *me* the good turn—by fingering my pigeon. Actually, I'm doing nothing for you. You're the fingerman but we can't pin it on you. Anything the girl might say would only be hearsay, and any two-bit shyster could get you off. So you shot your mouth off and did me a good turn but you're not as smart as you think you are, are you, pal?"

"I'm smart enough, Mr. Peeper."

"One day we'll catch up, Mr. Peabody."

"I'm looking forward," he said, and I got out of there.

We took no chances. We staked out 444 East 54th from the moment I brought in my confidential report that Jennifer Moore was set for the hit, and on Thursday Hockin Chynik in consort with Angelina Pisk made the hit, and then as they emerged from the building, *we* made our hit, but strong. The rest was mop-up.

Chynik did not talk as he languished in a cell preliminary to trial but a good deal of the loot was recovered from the apartment and through various underworld weasels who had the word that the insurance companies were offering solid rewards without questions. I was a witness at the trial giving some of the details of my investigation on behalf of Hudson of America and then Angelina Pisk, simmering softly, cooked his goose. He was represented by Arnold Kulik, as keen a regal legal beagle as exists, and after the State put in its case, Arnold called for a conference which called for a two-day adjournment. Then Arnold pulled a couple of political strings and when Court convened again Kulik shook a fist at Pisk

but withdrew his defense, pleaded his client guilty, and Chynik was sentenced to five years instead of twenty.

Miss Pisk, scot-free, joined up in unholy unmatrimony with Maximilian Bartlett in an unbridled bridal suite of two rooms and a kitchenette at 202 West 23rd Street and, except for one convivial evening of good music, bad jokes, and unmitigated wassail at *El Barracho* four years ago, that had been the last I had seen of her before I saw all of her. totally unexpected and unexplained and dead, naked in my bathtub.

THREE

WHILE I WAITED for the burnished coppers I shaved electrically in the bedroom and dressed eclectically but I remained as unshowered as a spinster without hope because to shower would disturb Angelina Pisk which disturbance would cause displeasure amongst the impending coppers and I am not one to cause such displeasure which could rankle to my detriment. Coppers finally descended like pennies from heaven in the persons of Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, three grim-visaged minions, and one smiling doctor from the Medical Examiner's office. I led them to my toilet where they grew busier than four plumbers tackling a gusher from a main artery leak. At length Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker joined me in the living room and pronounced, "Dead of a broken neck. Dead about nine hours. What time is it?"

I consulted my wrist watch. "A quarter to ten."

"Where were you at a quarter to one this morning?"

"Drinking up a storm with Alfred Surf."

"Who is Alfred Surf?"

"He's a book publisher."

"How long were you with him?"

"From nine yesterday evening until about five this morning."

"He'll corroborate you on this?"

"Of course he will."

"Who's the dame in the tub?"

"Angelina Pisk."

"A friend of yours?"

"Hardly even an acquaintance."

"Where are her clothes?"

"I *said* hardly even an acquaintance. How would I know where her clothes are?"

"Hardly even an acquaintance but she *is* in your bathtub."

"But without my consent, knowledge, or invitation."

"Now what the hell is this all about, Pete?"

"I woke up, I went to take a shower, and there she was. I called downtown for you specifically."

"Why me specifically?"

"Because you're Homicide, because you're a friend, because you're intelligent, and because I wanted to be sure I wouldn't draw some big-badged blockbuster who would want to prove himself by shoving me around."

"But this is crazy, Pete."

"You bet it is."

"You got any ideas?"

"I have."

"I'm listening."

"Ever hear of Hockin Chynik?"

"Who's Hockin Chynik?"

"A burglar who got stashed about five years ago."

"That's not my department. Like you said, I'm homicide. Burglars don't mean a thing to me until they kill somebody."

"It's my hunch this burglar did kill somebody."

"Whom?"

"Angelina Pisk."

"I thought you said he was stashed?"

"Would you check that, please, Lieutenant?" I gestured politely toward the phone. "Feel free."

He frowned but he went to the phone. He was thick, round, short-legged, and cobby with a square face, black bristly hair, and a powerful chest. He was all cop and a yard wide; he was a distinguished policeman who had made his record; he was bright, quick, resourceful, honest and honorable; he was an old-fashioned cop who went by the adage that it was his job to ferret for the slow truth rather than the fast pinch. He was an admirable man whom I was proud to know, proud to have worked with, and proud that he considered me a friend and a colleague. He made the call and came back to me. "The guy finished his term two weeks ago."

"Figures," I said.

"What figures? What hocks with this Hockin?"

I told him everything I knew as concerned Hockin Chynik.

"So?" he said but he showed more interest than a gilt-edged bond.

"Vengeance springs eternal. Two witnesses put the screws to him—me and Angelina Pisk. He puts her in my bathtub and puts me in the middle and like that he's even-up. If I wriggle out, he can still come and get me. Back there during the time of the trial, preliminary probation report had him set up as a weirdo, a guy who fancied himself a fancy-dan, a guy with a kooky kink to his imagination, and a guy good with a gun, good with an ice-pick, and

good with his hands. All of that fits. Also, he's an expert front-door man. So, some time during the night he tests that I'm not here, makes some pretext for bringing the girl along, opens my door and walks in with her, breaks her neck, strips her, lays her away in my bathtub, and walks out with her clothes. He's sprung out of the can and he's available for this action. Why not, Lieutenant?"

"Yeah why not? So first check should be that bartender."

"You're reading me real good, Lieutenant."

He gave instructions for the removal of Angelina Pisk and we went together to 202 West 23rd Street. On the way down I inquired as to whether he knew anything about the embezzlement of a hundred thousand dollars from the New York National and the disappearance of Charles R. Medford. He did not because New York is a big city with thousands of cops and he was Homicide and his business was murder and not embezzlement and vanished bankers.

I smiled for him and said, "I was only asking on the off-chance, Lieutenant."

"No off-chance. I only know what I read in the papers. What's your interest?"

"Medford is a friend of mine."

"You and your cockeyed friends."

"You're a friend, Lieutenant."

"Maybe I'm cockeyed too. Who isn't?"

At 202 West 23rd Street we knocked on the door of 2A which was Bartlett's apartment but there was no answer. "This time of day," I said, "a bartender figures to be home."

"You stay here," said Parker. "I'll get the janitor."

"Nowadays they're called super."

"Super is for a market. Janitor is for a house. That's the way I was brought up. I'm older than you. Stay here and I'll go get the janitor."

The janitor quaking under the stress of a flashed badge shakily opened the door for us and we located Maximilian in bed dressed in yellow silk pajamas which were perforated by three bullets all of which were in him. He was in a coma but he was alive and we called for an ambulance and rode with him to the hospital. Parker watched while they operated but I stayed in a waiting room drinking coffee which did nothing for my jitters. Booze would have been more ameliorative but they do not serve booze in a hospital unless you are the patient. I drank my coffee and stomped about quietly and then an attendant came for me and led me to

a sick-smelling room tainted with ether where Max lay surrounded by three doctors and Parker. Max was conscious and recognized me and smiled and winked bravely and when I asked about Chynik he drew a deep breath and said weakly, "He come last night. I had the night off. It was maybe twelve o'clock. Me and Angie was in bed and all of a sudden he was there with a gun in his hand. He made her get up and get dressed. Then he says goodbye to me and lets go with the gun. It hurt a lot. I couldn't move. Once or twice I woke up and I tried but I couldn't move. Now what about Angie? I want to know. Is she all right. The bastard didn't hurt her, did he? If he did, I promise you . . . I promise . . ." Whatever the promise it was to remain unfulfilled. His body arched from the bed in a taut spasm, he sighed quiveringly, and he died. One of the doctors performed the last examination and then closed the lids of his eyes. Softly the doctor said, "That's it, gentlemen. This poor guy's worries are over."

Outside, Parker said, "You're in the clear with me which puts you back on the spot as concerns this kookie Chynik. He's knocked off the gal, he's knocked off the guy who took his gal, but he's missed out on implicating you. I think you're smart enough to know how to watch your step."

"I think so, Lieutenant."

"This Chynik is now exclusively my business, Pete."

"Yes sir, Lieutenant."

"I said *exclusively*."

"I heard you, Lieutenant."

He took hold of my arm, but gently. "I know you, Peter. All too well. He dumped the gal in your tub so you consider it a personal affair. Will you kindly leave the guy to me?"

"Sorry," I said.

He let go my arm. He shrugged. "We seem to be dealing with a crazy bastard, a dangerous bastard. I'd hate to lose you, Pete. Why don't you leave well enough alone? We'll take care of this kook. I promise you we'll concentrate like all hell."

"I promise the same, Lieutenant."

"I can't talk you out of this, kid?"

"You wouldn't want me to lie to you, would you, Louie?"

He shrugged again. "You'll keep in touch?"

"You bet," I said.

FOUR

PARKER HAVING departed upon his business (and mine), I walked until I found a saloon (always a short walk in New York City) and had two swift drinks in memory of Maximilian Bartlett. I checked for the time: it was eleven-thirty. I checked for loose change: I had none. I gave the bartender a bill and he returned coins and I closed myself into the tavern telephone booth. I called the *Brittany* in Greenwich Village and asked for Michael Peabody and a sultry Southern voice said, "Just one minute, please," and there ensued the usual ear-splitting jiggles and then the voice came back and said, "There's no answer at Peabody, suh."

"Will you take a message, please?"

"Most certainly, suh."

"Peter Chambers called."

"Is that you, suh?"

"Correct. Mr. Peabody is to call me back at my office at any time after twelve o'clock. If I leave the office before he calls, I'll call you again and give you a number where I'll be. Got that?"

"Yes suh, is that all?"

"That's it, thank you."

"Thank *you,* suh." And she pulled the plug before I could hang up.

I resisted the temptation to have one more drink in memory of Maximilian Bartlett, exchanged the cool comfortable confines of a saloon at noon for the seething tumult of the money-earners out-of-doors, flagged down one of our Lilliputian New York taxis, twisted my spine in acrobatic ingress, was cowed by the imperious sidelong glance of the driver, and whispered from the tangle of my knees and elbows in a space that would have cramped the muscles of a miniature midget: "New York National, 500 Fifth." The lurch of the cab set my coccyx to the floorboards where I dwelt ruminatively on my journey to the bank. Once arrived I clambered forth, joints creaking back into outraged sockets, straightened up manfully, paid, and realigned my ego by the gift of a large gratuity

(perhaps that is the reason behind the invention of public conveyances suitable only for spry dwarfs).

I marched into the bank and once more my ego was pierced by more splinters than can rear their pointed heads at a Democratic rally in the Deep South. Have you ever attempted an audience with the President of a Bank? An audience with the Pope in Rome is simple by comparison. I was pilloried from post to post until I arrived at an Executive Secretary, male, with all the attributes of a fluttering female worried about a delay in the menstrual cycle.

"And why would *you* wish to see Mr. Sloan?" she, I mean he, said.

"I would wish to see Mr. Sloan about Mr. Charles R. Medford who, it has been bruited about, has scampered off with like a hundred thousand clams."

"Oh about *that*," said Executive Secretary and levitated out of foam-rubber-bottomed chair and for one extravagant moment I thought he was going to kiss me. Instead, wrinkling his nose, he sailed past me and frothed through a wood-paneled door and, dimpling, reappeared and said, "If you will kindly come this way, my dear sir."

In appreciation I patted his foam-rubbered-bottom and he fairly flew into the presence of Donald P. K. Sloan, foam-rubber seated on a highbacked swivel-throne, and in a falsetto trill of thrilling pronouncement intoned, "Mr. Sloan, *this* is Mr. Chambers."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Goldenfish," said Mr. Donald P. K. Sloan.

"Very welcome indeed, sir," said the Goldenfish and flapped his fins and bowed and swam back to his foam-rubbered perch and I was alone with *El Presidente.*

He was a skinny little guy, flap-cheeked and entirely bald, and his ulcer came through in a seemly series of hollow-echoing burps, all conservatively proper. Nobody can be the president of anything without appropriate flatulence, let alone the President of a Bank. He put fire to a king-sized filter-tip, laid upon me a long cold pontifical presidential stare, and then said, "Mr. Goldenfish has informed me that you are here, Mr. Chambers, because you may throw some light on the unfortunate incident involving Mr. Medford and a hundred thousand dollars of the bank's money."

"Not quite," I said, "but I'm going to try."

"Beg pardon? Try what?"

"Throw some light on the unfortunate incident etcetera."

This brought on a small burp and a large query. "Are you of the police, Mr. Chambers?"

"Of the private police, Mr. Sloan." I showed him my credentials.

He studied them and returned them. "I'm a busy man, Mr. Chambers. You have either barged in here under false pretense or my secretary misunderstood you. I was under the impression that you had some information for me. Have you?"

"No sir. Rather, you have some information for me."

"I have?" He flapped his cheeks and extinguished his cigarette. "About what?"

"I should like to know the details of what you have referred to as the unfortunate incident involving Mr. Medford."

"Now look here! I've had just about enough of this impertinence. If you have any legitimate concern in this matter I'm certain the police will supply you—"

"They might but even if they did that would involve a hell of a lot of red tape and eat up a hell of a lot of time. I'd rather have it from the horse's mouth."

"The horse's mouth, would you?" A flush like a lady's blush suffused the bald pate. "Mr. Chambers, I'd advise you to get out of here—at once!" A thin white finger moved toward a fat white button on the desk and I had visions of a couple of burly bank guards politely bouncing me out on my buttocks.

"Hold that!" I said. The finger remained poised but unpressed. "Have you ever heard of Penelope Arlington?"

"Of course. Miss Arlington is one of our largest depositors, one of our most active customers, and a personal friend to boot."

"Well, give this a fast listen, Mr. Sloan, and then take your finger away from that button. Miss Arlington is also a personal friend of mine although I've never booted her figuratively or literally. So is Charlie Medford a personal friend of mine. So is Charlie Medford's son, Jack, a personal friend of mine. I'll give you a little personal history to prove all of that. Charlie Medford came to work here twelve years ago. At that time he was a virtuous employee in the Chaste National Bank, doing very well in their Loan Department. The Head of *your* Loan Department died and Miss Arlington recommended Charlie and you hired him. Now I'm not here as some nosey private operator trying to smell out some lucre for himself. I'm here, first, because Jack Medford retained me and I'm here, second, because Charlie Medford is no crook and you know that as well as I and somebody ought to take *that* tack in trying to get to the bottom of this thing. Now are you going to push your fat button, Mr. Sloan, or are you going to give me an opportunity to go to bat for Charles R. Medford?"

The flush descended from the pate and covered his face but the

finger came away from the button. As he reached for the telephone I said, "Miss Arlington is out of town."

"I know that." He lifted the receiver and said into the mouthpiece, "Get me young Jack Medford, please." He hung up, drew a handkerchief from his breast pocket and mopped his face. As he carefully returned the handkerchief to the pocket he said, "I'm sorry I was discourteous to you, Mr. Chambers."

"I'm sorry I forced that discourtesy by my discourtesy, Mr. Sloan. I've had a lousy morning and my nerves are on edge."

The telephone tinkled and he picked up the receiver, listened, smiled, said, "Jack, there's a Peter Chambers here. He says you've retained him on that matter regarding your father." He listened, nodding. "Mr. Chambers says he's also a friend of Miss Penelope Arlington." He listened again, said, "Thank you."

I waved. "Would you tell him to stay put where he is. I'll see him later."

Mr. Sloan delivered the message, said goodbye, and hung up. He lit a cigarette, said, "All right, Mr. Chambers, what exactly can I do for you?"

"What happened here with Charlie Medford?"

"Actually, there's very little more I know than what's appeared in the newspapers."

"Would you tell me, please?"

"Well, sir, as you probably know, Charlie Medford is a very meticulous precise man. He goes to lunch every day promptly at twelve, returns every day promptly at one. If he has any outside business to do, if he will remain away for any length of time, he'll so inform his secretary. That hasn't failed once in the twelve years he's been with us, and a most satisfactory twelve years that has been."

"Yes sir," I said.

"Yesterday, at ten minutes to twelve, he went down to the vault and requisitioned one hundred thousand dollars in cash."

"Is that unusual, sir?"

"No, not particularly. A bank as large as ours has many types of clients, both individual and corporate, whose needs are divers and complicated. Charlie Medford has, frequently, requisitioned such sums and larger. As Head of the Loan Department and, as a matter of fact, as one of the officers of the bank, such requisitions are practically routine; what I mean is that no one downstairs at the vault would think for a moment to question such requisition. There's a form to be filled out which he signs and that's that. The form is stamped with the time and that's how we know it was

exactly ten minutes to twelve. He placed the money into his attache case, went back upstairs to his desk, and promptly at twelve he left the bank. He seemed to be in a pleasant mood, as we have learned from his secretary. He chatted about the weather, made a joke or two, and then went out—as far as the secretary was concerned—to lunch."

"But carrying the attache case."

"Oh yet no question. The police examined the secretary very closely upon that. Definitely, he was carrying the attache case, although the secretary had no idea what was in it. There's been full corroboration—other of our employees saw him going out at twelve o'clock carrying the case." He took a last puff of the cigarette and rubbed it out in a tray. "And that's it, Mr. Chambers."

"What's it, Mr. Sloan?"

"That's all we know."

"But there must be a finish."

"The finish, the beginning, the end . . ." He shrugged. "When by two-thirty he hadn't returned, his absence was noted and reported to me. Upon a routine check, we learned of the requisition. We called his home and when there was no answer there we simply had no alternative other than notiying the police. It did not occur to us that he had absconded—I still don't believe that—but we felt that perhaps he had become ill, or he had met with foul play. On the other hand, there *are* some very peculiar aspects about all of this."

"Such as, Mr. Sloan?"

"Just as you, I find it difficult to conceive of Charlie Medford as a thief, but a close study of his books show no request by any client for any such sum. Why would Charlie requisition a hundred thousand dollars? Why would he make such requisition and say nothing about it to anyone—not his secretary, no one? I repeat —Charlie was a meticulous man. He always made a record of every move. His desk diary always contained all of his appointments. The diary showed no outside appointment with anybody for yesterday—yet he walked out carrying a hundred thousand dollars. In my own mind, I've tried to give him every benefit of the doubt, but . . ." He shrugged eloquently.

"Have you people checked his finances?"

"Of course. They're in perfect order. Charlie was in good shape."

"Then why . . ."

"It's baffling, any way you look at it. We're hoping against hope he'll show up and explain. But it's twenty-four hours now and

there hasn't been one single solitary word. When my secretary announced you, a stranger, I had hoped against hope . . ."

"I must have been an awful disappointment."

"Frankly, you were. Mr. Goldenfish said you wanted to see me about Charles R. Medford. I had hoped, out of the blue . . ."

"Of course. I understand."

"It's a lame excuse for my having been testy, but that's my excuse. And now, if there's anything else . . ."

"There's nothing else, Mr. Sloan, and I thank you kindly for your time and your patience with me. It's a hell of a loony affair and I'll admit that it doesn't smell real good for Charlie but I'm a great one for believing that a leopard doesn't change his spots, and whatever spots Charlie may have, he's always been a guy with impeccable integrity. There must be *some* explanation for all of this and I'm going to do my darndest to supply it."

"You have my blessings, sir, and whatever cooperation you may demand."

"Thank you, Mr. Sloan. We sure started off on the wrong foot but I'm happy we skipped over to the right one."

"We're all only human, Mr. Chambers. We all have our pressures."

"Thank you again, sir, and goodbye."

"Oh just one moment." He scribbled on a small sheet of memo paper and handed it to me. "My home address and phone number," he said. "Be in touch with me at any time, day or night, for anything I may be able to do to be of assistance. And if you incur any expenses on this matter, I should appreciate it if you would bill me personally."

"Charlie's a friend. No expenses. This one's on me. All of it."

"Good luck, Mr. Chambers."

Say what you will about crusty old bank presidents, there are some who belong to the human race. Prejudice is part of our ingrained idiocy. We all have our prejudices. I used to have a prejudice against bank presidents. Donald P. K. Sloan cured me of that, bless his ulcer. So far it had been one hell of a bad day for me. I had been awakened out of not-enough sleep. I had learned that Charlie Medford had disappeared with a hundred thousand bananas. I had found Angelina Pisk dead in my bathtub. I had watched Maximilian Bartlett die in the middle of a promise on a hospital bed. But I had been cured of a prejudice and any time you are cured of a prejudice, any prejudice, already you are way out in front of whatever your bad day. There you have your philosophy for the afternoon of Friday, June fifteenth. Stick it, and I don't

mean where you can smoke it. Why is it that philosophy almost always carries with it the stench of pomposity? Okay, stick them both and bear along with me.

I had work to do.

FIVE

I CHECKED INTO my office at twelve-fifteen and was greeted by the bunched-up frown of my beloved secretary, Miss Miranda Foxworth, beautifully ugly without a bunched-up frown. My Miranda was chunky, blocky, wrinkled and leathery, on the sunless side of fifty, dour and dominant and vastly capable and pointedly critical and enormously compassionate, my conscience and my confidante, my sole employee who, upon rare occasion, permitted me to pretend that I was her boss.

"Good morning," she said in her sternest baritone.

"Good morning, Miranda," I said as brightly as I could manage.

"Only it's afternoon," she said.

"Good afternoon, Miranda."

"You look terrible, it grieves me to state."

"Didn't get enough sleep."

"One would think that by noon the next day one would have, somehow, pushed in enough sleep the night before."

"Yes, one would think. Now please let's shuffle off this subject of slumber and wake up with Mr. Alfred Surf. Has he been here?"

She shook her head. "But he called."

"When?"

"About eleven-thirty. Said he had an appointment with you for twelve but please delay it to twelve-thirty."

"Fine. Anyone else call?"

With Miranda, unless she was in a good mood, the extraction of messages was like the pulling of teeth.

"The usual from Miss Twits," she said. Miss Topsy Twits was a Turkish belly-dancer whom I adored, too much perhaps. My interest in Twits had become slightly overwhelming, so I had dropped her and run. I am a bachelor and the bane of a bachelor is the pain of involvement—We take flight—and I had fled the trap of Topsy Twits. Sick? So it goes.

"And what did you tell Miss Twits?" I said.

"Told her the usual. That you were tied up on a case out of town. But this Twits of yours has a twitch of tenacity. I've been

throwing her that pitch for weeks now but she makes her regular call practically every morning before she goes to sleep."

"The Turks are noted for their tenacity, dear Miranda."

"But this Twits isn't Turkish, she's American."

"Of Turkish descent, dear Miranda."

"Dear boss, whatever you have may escape me but whatever it is—for *her* you've sure got it."

If it was a compliment, it was dubious, but a crumb from Miranda is like a loaf from another, so I batted my eyes in mock immodesty and continued with my timid inquisition. "Anyone else call?"

"You mean you've latched on to a new navel-shaker?"

"A Michael Peabody?" I ventured.

"Nobody like a Peabody called. Now go inside and slap some color into your fare. The way you look, you're liable to scare the pants off Mr. Surf."

"The way Mr. Surf will probably look, he's liable to scare the pants off you."

Leaving her with pants on but mouth open, I entered into the sanctum sanctorum, gravitated toward the mirror, and leered at the leering reflection with the puffed satchels beneath the eyes. I stuck out my tongue and gazed at it dolefully in the time-honored fashion of every drunkard the morning after. Then dutifully I slapped color into my cheeks and watched it recede. I replaced my tongue, readjusted my face, straightened my tie, scowled at myself with scant enthusiasm, made my way around the desk, and fell into my swivel-chair where I permitted stemmed wrath to steam up at Hockin Chynik.

Jail is the occupational hazard of the burglar. Anyone in any criminal venture pits himself against the law. If he wins, he has leisure time and a soft life and easy money; if he loses, he spends his leisure time in the can where the life is harder and the money is meaningless—but that is the gamble and every professional knows the risk. When a racket guy slips the handle and gets sent away for his vacation, he bears no animus against judge, jury, prosecutor, or witness: they are as impersonal as thrown dice that have turned up snake-eyes. A guy who emerges with a clank from the clink, a guy who comes out angry at the dice, a nut who is cracking for vengeance, is a hooting son of a bitch of a dangerous loon who needs his wings clipped and I intended to do just that for Hockin Chynik because now it was personal, both ways. Chynik had murdered Pisk, had murdered Bartlett, and had tried to slide a murder-deal into the lap of Chambers. Once he discovered that

Chambers had a slippery lap he would sneak out of his hole with less subtle ambition, but I was not waiting. I was set to reverse that procedure: I was seeking him. Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, a wise old bird, had comprehended my intention and had tried to dissuade it but he had not tried too hard because he *was* a wise old bird and he realized the futility: he understood that unspoken and undeclared a personal vendetta had flowered up to more pricks than a cactus and there was not a thing in the world he could do about it.

More pricks than a cactus. I squirmed in my chair as though I were seated on one. I was bursting with a rage to hang a hook into Hockin and here I was sitting around on the pricks of my cactus waiting for Alfred Surf. But what in all hell could I do? My one conduit to Hockin Chynik was Mike the Pea but Mike the Pea was not in his shell. I reached a hand for the phone to try the *Brittany* again when my squawk-box delivered Miranda in her most dulcet tones.

"Mr. Surf to see you, sir."

I touched a button and said, "Send him in."

And then through the squawk-box came Miranda's whisper, "He looks as bad as you said but my pants are still on although he is one gentleman for whom I would take them off if he asked."

That brought a smile to my mouth and I projected it at the door which opened and closed as the Surf rolled in. "Hi," he said. "Please don't look so happy. It makes me ill."

Gratefully I let my smile expire. "Sit down." I gestured. "Take your choice. Hard chair, easy chair, sofa."

"Sofa so good," he said but sat in a hard chair alongside the desk. "Rough night, eh, kid?"

"Rough."

"But a fella in your business, you can sleep it off."

"Yeah."

"But not me. I was at work by nine-thirty."

"Yeah."

"Laconic this afternoon, aren't we?"

"This appointment was your idea, lover. So stop with the comments and come to the point, if any."

"The point is going to make some dough for you, so try to be a little civil to the harbinger of hard money, even if it hurts."

I bounced around on my cactus. "What money, hard or soft?"

"Didn't I tell you last night?"

"Last night you told me dirty jokes."

"I mentioned about your helping to write a book, didn't I?"

"You did but I didn't hear one ungodly word about gelt. Am I about to hear such word now?"

"You are but don't rush me. I'm not as young as you. A moment, please, so that I may collect myself before you start collecting." He stretched long legs, poked in his weskit, found a cigar, and stabbed it into his mouth. He poked further for a lighter, produced one with a flame like an Olympic torch, lit up, puffed bluely, tilted his head, and regarded my ceiling with tobacco-induced benevolence.

He was a big man, about fifty, wide at the shoulders and narrow at the flanks. He had a square face usually as ruddy as a cussword in England but today it bore the faint lemon pallor of a misspent night. He had shrewd blue eyes behind rimless glasses, grizzled close-cut hair, a high forehead, a deep voice, and a white-capped smile of expensive dental jackets. He was rich, unmarried, charming, daring, successful, sometimes inscrutable but never unscrupulous. He was a complex man tougher to figure than a problem in calculus. Now he ground his expensive teeth into the base of the cigar and said, "I like your style in those silly detective exploits you write about. It will fit exactly with what I have in mind."

"And what do you have in mind, Alfred?"

"Confessions Of A Con Man."

"So you said last night during intermissions from roistering. It's the title of a book on which I'm supposed to collaborate with a Barry Howard."

"And I gave no elaboration on the collaboration."

"None. Nor did you mention money."

"I shall mention money this afternoon, old boy."

"That will be a decided improvement, old boy."

"I take it if it's money on occasion you're interested. Correct, old boy?"

"Correction, old boy. If it's money I'm always interested."

"Beautifully put, old boy."

"Thank you, old boy."

"First then a brief introduction to Barry Howard and be prepared, if you please, for shock. Ready?"

"I'm all ears like corn ready to be shocked. Shoots."

The rimless glasses glistened sadly but he made no attempt at a topper so I knew I was now enmeshed in a business conference because a business conference is as deadly serious as it is deathly boring. I lit a cigarette, lay back in my swivel chair, and hoped that the money was sufficient to tip the balance.

"I met the guy," said Alfred Surf, "at a swank party a couple

of months ago thrown by Elsa Stutz up at Scarsdale. When he learned who I was, he cottoned to me like a nettle to a wool sweater. He said that he has heard of me, heard of my reputation as a publisher and as a man of integrity—I'm quoting *him* now, mind you—and said that he wanted to write a book. Well, that's about par for the course at any party I attend. Every stranger I meet, once he learns my business, wants to write a book. You know?"

"I know," I said grimly.

"I humored him because he was a very pleasant man, distinguished, good-looking, well-spoken, most attractive. The more he talked, though, the less I was humoring him—the more I was growing interested. First off, he's a linguist. He speaks twelve languages, fluently. I'm pretty good at French and Spanish and I tested him and he was only great. He also speaks English, Portuguese, German, Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Hungarian—but fluently. He has more than a smattering of other languages, but those he speaks fluently. By birth, he's a Hungarian, but his family migrated to Paris, where his father was Professor of Languages at the Sorbonne."

"What did he want to write for you—a universal lexicon?"

"Easy, old boy. The more I talked with Barry Howard—"

"It's not a Hungarian name."

"It's the name he's using now."

"He's used other names?"

"Countless."

I swung my chair to upright. "A *goniff?*"

"Of the uppermost echelon."

"It gets interesting."

"It gets more interesting. Listen."

"I'm all ears like corn—"

"Please. Once was enough of that."

"Check," I said although aggrieved. I thought perhaps it had missed the first time. It had not. It had bounced off and lain there, a dud undetonated. A miss is not as good as a smile. I sulked in my swivel chair, I pouted, I puffed petulantly on my cigarette, but Alfred Surf, intent upon business, disregarded my discomfiture.

He tucked his cigar into a circle of mouth, sucked, and blew blue expensive aromatic fumes. "The guy," he said, "confided that he had never done an honest day's work in his life. He's a swindler, a confidence man, an international imposter."

"And he told all this to *you?*"

"He wants to do a book, an autobiography. What else is an autobiography but a confessional?"

"But why?"

"Why what?"

"Why should this *schlemiel* want to do an autobiography?"

"Why does anybody—panderer, politician, playwright, potentate, Polly Adler?" He squinted behind his lenses. "The psychiatrists have explained it quite frequently; they have the same impulse themselves to which too often they yield in the shape of one of those ponderous tomes of dreary drivel that nobody reads except perhaps perforce their patients." He sighed. "An autobiography has been explained as a wedge—a wedge to immortality. The desire for immortality flickers, no matter how fitfully, in all of us. An autobiography is a tombstone, and the best of all possible tombstones, because it stands erected while you're still alive. What better tombstone than a tombstone you're still around to enjoy?" Once more he sighed. "A published autobiography is the final punctuation—a triumphant exclamation mark—for a towering ego. There comes a time in a person's life—generally a superlative egotist with a damned interesting life—when he'd rather have an autobiography than bread, butter, cakes, or ale."

"And what time is it in this Barry Howard's life?"

"He's about fifty-five, I'd judge."

"And he's *anxious* to do this *Confessions Of A Con Man?*"

"Oh now come off it, Peter. Thieves, murderers, drunks, drug-addicts, sadists, prostitutes—all have done autobiographies some of which have contained unbelievably horrifying and incriminating matter, and you damned well know it as well as I do."

"What about this Barry Howard's matter?"

"Let me get to it chronologically, won't you?"

"Tick away, my friend."

The cigar had gone brownly dead and he used his torch to revivify it. He puffed it to glowing and smiled around it. "Suffice it to say that my conversation with Barry Howard up at Elsa Stutz's warranted a further conversation by appointment at my office."

"And how did that turn out?"

"Just beautifully. And that conversation in my office warranted many further conversations; rather, soliliquies directed at a tape-recorder, but brother, *what* soliliquies! He made one proviso, however, which, of course, I shall honor."

"And that?"

"If and when the autobiography is published and he is not

around to collect the royalties, I am to hold them until I hear from him, and forward them. He would send me a letter over his signature, the letter hand-written and containing certain code-words. He would give me an address to which immediately I would send the money in care of whatever name he specified. This condition was entered as a clause in our contract."

"The guy sure trusts you."

"Why not? I have a reputation, and I'm proud of my reputation, and I'm pleased that Mr. Howard is cognizant of that reputation. Actually—as you'll soon become aware—the money doesn't mean a damned thing to him, he's quite solvent. I believe he inserted the condition as a bulwark for some future time when, possibly, he might be in need. Who knows how the wheel turns, and it's a wise man that makes provision for all contingencies."

"What about those tapes?"

"Unbelievably interesting. There's enough material there for *two* books and my contract is ironclad, signed, sealed, and witnessed."

"Is this sort of thing usual between publisher and . . . er . . . author?"

"Not unusual. I mean, it's been done before, by other firms, as well as my own." He puffed on the cigar which was down to its middle now. "But let's get to you, dear Peter."

"Always an interesting subject, to me at least."

"Mr. Howard admits he's no writer and admits that he has neither the time nor the inclination to do the actual writing. I racked my brains for a proper collaborator and nothing happened until I thought of you. You're perfect for this job. You understand the criminal mind, you have a sort of empathy for these people, and you have just the style for this kind of work. A light touch on a sorry subject is like flint on stone: it brings forth the spark which is so necessary . . ."

"And did Mr. Howard agree to me?"

"Mr. Howard never heard of you."

"Well, that's flattering."

"It's *my* flattery that counts here, not Barry Howard's. I declared you as the collaborator and he had no objection—so you are the collaborator."

"Unless *I* have objection."

"You won't when you hear the terms."

I settled back happily to hear the terms but there was nary the germ of a term in what came next—there was more about Barry Howard.

"The stuff on the tape is absolutely sensational. In thirty years devoted to the single purpose of peaceably separating people from money this guy has stolen, and spent, upwards of ten million dollars."

"Alfred, old boy, it's none of my business but have you ever considered that you're *getting* the business from this Barry Howard?"

"Meaning?"

"That the stuff on the tape may be a load of crap."

He grunted. "Even if every word is apocryphal, I'd still publish the book, because the material is genuinely interesting, utterly ingenious, vastly different and absolutely fascinating. However, I don't believe it to be apocryphal. After all, I wasn't born yesterday. He's mentioned names, dates, persons, and places and I've checked and they've checked out, all of them. Also, in his thirty years, he's been in jail only twice—once, as Sigmund Brent in Miami, and once as Hugh Radford in Lisbon. The first time he did two years, the second time three years. I've checked both of those and they've proved up."

"But, pal, how do you know he's the guy; the guy who went to jail, and the guy who says he's the subject of the autobiography?"

"Once again, I think he is, but if he isn't, I don't care."

"If he is, you're liable to have trouble with the police."

"Not me. He. And I've told him that. Me? I'm only publishing a book, putting memoirs into print. He's confessing to innumerable unsolved swindles; gorgeous peculations but definitely high crimes."

"And what did he say to that?"

"Said that it was his risk. Said that he was happy to run the risk. Said that by the time the book was published, he'd be out of the country, living under a different name in an entirely different milieu. Said that it was my job to publish and to hang on to the royalties so that I could deliver if and when he ever sent for them."

"And did you tell him that the cops were liable to arrive before the money?"

"I did and once again he said that was his risk, that he would know how to handle it once the circumstances evolved."

I shrugged. "Quite a guy."

"And what an operator! Never twice in the same city, but all over the world—Bombay, San Francisco, Liverpool, Tokyo, Haifa, Buenos Aires, Dallas, London, Rio, Reno, New Orleans—and always a skillful swindle, always with a dame as an accomplice but never the same dame, and never any violence, he abhors violence."

"A pacifist, eh?"

"With an abiding revulsion for physical violence."

"And where does he get these dames? Every sale a new frail."

"Oh, he's a beautiful, striking, attractive man. According to him, in each city, he *first* finds the girl and settles down with her, before he even begins to plot his course."

"Not to be plotitudinous—how does he get rid of her; I mean, each time?"

"She gets her share, and that's the end."

"Is it? Have you ever settled down with a gal and then, just like that, try to take off?"

He held up one hand, palm facing me. "You musn't misunderstand. There's no romance, nothing like that, never."

"He settles down with the gal but there's no romance. This guy a fairy?"

He looked at me askance. His expression took on acerbity which has nothing to do with absurdity but to me, in my innocence, his vex was my perplex. What the hell had I asked? We sat, for moments, sort of glare to glare, and then I swiveled around with my back to him which left us sitting, for more moments, sort of ass to askance.

"Peter," he said finally, "I'm no quidnunc."

I twirled around to share of his glare again.

"Alfred," I said thinly but stoutly, "I don't know what means quidnunc."

"Gossip, busybody, tattletale, scuttlebuttler. That's what means quidnunc."

"Scuttlebuttler," I said in new fond admiration. "There you have really ripped off a gasser, Dad. My compliments, my encomiums, and a long litany of unspoken panegyrics."

That cleared the air of all but the stink of nicotine and the pollution of polysyllables. He smiled and I smiled and I said, "So? Is he?"

"I think so but of course it's none of my affair."

"I *hope* it isn't, dearest Alfredo."

"I dont know why you're interested—"

"Pure curiosity."

"—but if you are, you'll have an opportunity to arrive at your own judgment. I expect you're going to meet him."

"When?"

"This afternoon. I'm throwing a big shindig at my place, starting at four this afternoon, for one of my authors, Vickie Wiggleston, who has a new book—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

"It starts at four with cocktails and goes on practically all night, on business expense, including buffet supper. Everybody who is anybody, plus of course everybody who is nobody way down to the vacuity of nothing in tailored clothes, will be there. Barry Howard, and any guests he might choose to invite, has been asked. He called today and accepted—said he had decided to remain in town—especially to meet you. I insist that you be there, Peter."

"Any other inducement aside from the baroque Barry?"

"There'll be lots of gals, a lot of them beautiful."

"That's an inducement, but there must be more. I'm hinting out loud, Pappy."

"Oh." He laid away his dead cigar. He rustled amongst his clothes and produced papers, two clipped-together sheafs with ominous legalese blue backs. "One is my ironclad contract with Barry Howard," he said.

"Not interested."

"The other is my contract with you."

"Interested, but you don't expect me to read it, do you? You're hiring me as an artist, a writer, an ilk that doesn't read contracts. Tell me what it says and where to sign."

"You're to receive one-third of all royalties, which, it is my hunch, are going to be more than mere, because it is my earnest belief that we're hatching a best-seller here. I'm paying an advance of fifteen thousand, ten to him, five to you."

I scrambled for a pen but said, "Where's my five?"

He laid a check on my desk. I hastened to sign where he directed. He gathered up his papers, left one set for me.

"Congratulations," he said.

"Thank you," I said. "You too."

It had been, so far, a fruitful day, or, a day of fruit, aside from Barry Howard. Alfred Surf took up his truncated cigar and took his leave. Me, I stuffed away the check and the contract, picked up the phone and plucked out the number of the *Brittany*.

"Peter Chambers," I said to the hominy-grits switchboarder, "calling again for Michael Peabody."

"He has not returned yet, suh."

"For the next half hour or so, I'll be at this number," I said. I gave her Jack Medford's telephone number. "If Mr. Peabody comes in tell him to call me there, urgent. If he doesn't, before I leave, I'll call you back, and tell you where I'll be. Solid?" I said.

"Oh yes suh, solid," she said and giggled the magnolia-and-moonlight gurgle awash with the perky perquisites that are the

exclusive property of charmers reared below the Mason-Dixon line. And now, fellow-Americans, fellow-patriots, and fellow-flag-wavers in my far-flung fifty states, I challenge you. What was Mason, who was Dixon, and what was their line? Ponder that, as I pondered it floating in ignorance, wafting past my Miranda into the tangerine sunshine of sooty springtime in New York, Friday, the day of our Lord, the fifteenth of June.

SIX

JACK MEDFORD was a young man unyoked from many problems but still hamstrung by a few. He had been reared since the age of five without a mother which is a rough start on any course. His father, always a respected banker but a singularly handsome man with a small fortune of inherited wealth, was an inveterate lady-chaser and thus no symbol of respectability for the growing boy. The boy himself grew into a savagely handsome adolescent pampered, petted, spoiled and despoiled by the shrinking violents of the bleaker sex. On top of that he had an overweening disrespect for the value of money, an overwhelming aptitude for getting rid of it with indiscriminate speed, and an egregious unconcern about earning any part of it.

"He has a will to nil," his father had lamented.

"What the hell is a will to nil?" I had queried.

"An extraordinary willingness to do absolutely nothing. That boy is a born idler."

That was not entirely true but the banker's mind of Charlie Medford carried within it the block against admitting even unconscious equivocation. The boy loved to paint and was good at it and the boy loved to sculpture and was good at it but to the banker's mind of Charlie Medford these were the parasitic hobbies of the dilettante; he wanted his boy to choose and work toward one of the allegedly respected paying professions: doctor, lawyer, engineer, banker, broker, business man, even scientist. Thus a breach opened and rebellion poured through and in Jack Medford's senior year at high school the rebellion curdled to serious trouble and both father and son, bent by circumstance, twisted their views to a mutually hostile readjustment.

Jack had been running with a pack of neo-delinquents and during an evening on the town an internecine rumble had developed during which one boy was stabbed to death by another. As was later adduced this had been a personal fight between two boys but at the beginning the police mistook it for an outbreak of juvenile warfare and Jack among others was arrested. He had been

kept incommunicado overnight, questioned, cross-questioned, and severely mauled about by certain sadistic misfits that contaminate every police department. In the morning Charlie had communicated with me and I had made my inquiries and made my phone calls and pulled my strings and I had finally sprung the boy free and clear and scared green but forever disenchanted and distrustful of police.

Every clout has a sliver of reminding, and Jack Medford had learned his lesson. It had been an ill wind but it had not blown upon a hood. Jack straightened up and flew right, aided and abetted by a remorseful if bewildered Charlie, with Uncle Peter in the middle as mediator. It was decided that Jack would do four years at Columbia, earn a diploma, and then select a career unbesmirched by paternal bias. Upon graduation, and as per pact, Jack became a sculptor supported but not uplifted by Papa Medford. Charlie provided adequately but not lavishly and their uneasy truce merged to a lasting armistice if not a permanent peace, but money remained the root of all upheaval for young Jack. He ran through the long green as though it were short grass. He was a stalwart adherent of the sage that had first proclaimed the precept that money is like manure: good only when spread around. Jack spread it as though it were good news and he was the sole herald. He had expensive tastes, he ran with expensive girls, and his debts piled up like drifts in a blizzard. He had an acknowledged talent and one day he would make his mark—also his franc, his florin, his guinea, his rupee, his lira, his ruble, his yen—but sculptors take a long time in coming and in the interim he was carving out a statuesque composite of arrears that could only be discounted by a sudden stroke of fortune, huge largesse from a doting patron, an undetected act of crime, or the death of his father of whom he was sole heir.

His studio, rent and furniture and equipment donated by Dad, was lofty and cavernous, and when I rang the bell at one o'clock of the afternoon of Friday, June fifteenth, clangorous reverberations returned in hollow echoes but Jack Medford opened the door before the last echo died.

"Hi," he said. "Please come in."

He was dressed to the teeth but without cutlass. He was wearing a dark-blue pin-striped suit with peaked lapels, obviously custom-tailored. His white shirt was formal with French cuffs and gold links. His tie was richly conservative, dark-blue with small red figures.

"All dressed up and nowhere to go," I said.

"Incorrect, Mr. Chambers. I have somewhere to go, *three* some-

wheres, as a matter of fact. I've kept postponing them, waiting for you."

"Gals?"

He grinned. "Incorrect again. Customers. That is, *possible* customers. Each interested in a bronze bust of himself and each willing to pay." He shook his head. "A man must be an awful crumb to want a bronze bust of himself."

"Each to his hone. Some guys feel sharp with a bronze bust, some guys need them live and nippled, and for some guys nothing else will do but an autobiography. Where'd you dig up the prospective customers?"

"Recommendations."

"From whom?"

"Penelope Arlington."

"We're back to her again, huh?" I walked all around him, inspecting him. "She seems to be doing all right by you."

"Not as all right as I'd like."

"She's producing, isn't she? Aside from customers?"

"Yes, but not enough."

"Wasn't it only this morning that you said you had all the money you need?"

"All the money I need *not* to have to argue with Dad about money—that's what I meant. But I don't have all the money I need, not by a long shot."

"Don't tell me that when Penelope Arlington is stuck on a handsome young guy, she's stingy."

"She's generous."

"But not generous enough to suit you."

"That's right."

"Who in hell could ever be generous enough to suit you, little pal? You treat money like its toilet paper."

"Please, no lectures, not today, Mr. Chambers." He intertwined the fingers of his hands and squeezed and I could hear the crack of knuckles. "What about my father? Did you find out anything at the bank that made any sense?"

"Nothing, He packed a bag and went to lunch and didn't come back. No rhyme, no reason, no sense, nothing."

"Christ, it's nutty, baffling, crazy."

"So said, in substance, Mr. Donald P. K. Sloan. Yet you both seem to be going along doing business as usual."

"What in hell kind of crack is *that*?"

"Sorry." I lit a cigarette. It's only . . . well . . . I didn't expect to find you all dolled up like this."

"How am I supposed to go visit—in my jeans?"

"Forget it."

"I can't just sit here holding my head in my hands."

"Okay. Forget it. I'm sorry. Now simmer down."

We were in a small cluttered sitting room, actually an anteroom to the huge cavern of the studio proper. Beyond the studio was the bedroom and bath.

"You're going to see Penelope about five-thirty this afternoon," I said. "Correct?"

"Yes."

"And you're going to inquire about this new dame he's been running around with lately. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Maybe that way some light can get thrown on this."

"I hope so. I just hope that Miss Arlington *knows* the person. She's a marvelous woman but, in a way, feather-brained. She told me that Dad was dating this lady, and that he met her there at Miss Arlington's, but she never mentioned her name. I just hope she *knows,* and if she knows, *remembers.* That Miss Arlington—"

"Stop calling her Miss Arlington!"

"I beg pardon?"

"Stop being so formal just because you're all dressed up in your *bar-mitzvah* suit. You've practically admitted sleeping with the old bag."

"Christ, Mr. Chambers, I've never seen you as jumpy as this."

"Yeah. Nerves. Sorry. Maybe you can be nice and calm about your father absconding with a hundred thousand dollars—"

"Now I resent that." His black eyes flamed.

"Sorry again, kid. That's the way I've been spending most of my day today, apologizing to everybody. Yes, I'm nervous, I'm scratchy as all hell. All that's eating you is this business with your father, which is plenty, but at least you can control yourself. I've got that, and other things—which is a damned poor excuse for taking out my temper on others. Okay, from here on in, I'll be nice, calm, and contained as befits a friend of your father, albeit a young friend; well, comparatively young." I dumped my cigarette and sat down beside a jumble-topped, antique, knee-holed desk. I pushed the phone aside and rested an elbow. "Any way it works out at Penelope's, you'll call me at once. "Oh!" I slid off my elbow and snapped my thumb. "I'll be at Alfred Surf's on Park Avenue. His home. He's in the phone book. That's where you'll call me. Check?"

"Yes sir," he said.

"Good boy. Now sit down, won't you, and let's you and I do a bit of a recap."

"Yes sir." He pulled up a rush-bottomed ladderback chair, turned it about, straddled it, rushed his bottom to the rush-bottom, laid his forearms on the top rung of the ladderback and clasped his fingers.

"Yesterday, Thursday, at twelve o'clock noon, your father copped a walk with a hundred gees for company."

"So they tell us. I don't believe it. But so they tell us."

"However, definitely, the evening before, Wednesday evening, he was here?"

"Yes sir."

"What time?"

"Seven o'clock. He was to stay at the bank to catch up with some paper work, and then come here. He arrived promptly at seven. You know my father. He's a bug for punctuality."

"All right. What was his mood?"

"I don't know quite what you're asking, Mr. Chambers."

"Well, we're dealing with a man who, the next day, is supposed to have trotted away with a hundred thousand snappers. We *both* know your father, a meticulous, methodical man. Certainly, I think, larceny wouldn't have been a carefree flightly impulse with him. If he was going to take his famous walk on Thursday, he would have at least plotted his path by Wednesday. Am I coming through?"

He smiled, showing strong white teeth. "You bet, and you win. His mood was perfectly normal. He didn't seem worried or upset, not in the least. He was tired, naturally, and somewhat disheveled, but remember he had come directly from work."

"What happened?"

"He washed up, I made cocktails, we had a drink and chatted, and then we went to dinner."

"What time?"

"I'd say seven-thirty."

"You said you ate at *Whytes*."

"Yes sir, *Whytes*, right here in Fifty-seventh."

"And there you had your discussion about Penelope Arlington?"

"Argument would be a better word."

"He knew that you were taking money from her . . . er . . . that she was your patron—or is it patroness?—and it bothered him."

"That was the gist but I still say the gist was not the true point. If it were anybody else, I think he'd have laughed it off, or ac-

cepted it as the charity expected to be bestowed upon an arty sculptor he so despises."

"Don't get him wrong kid. He doesn't despise art *or* sculptors except when that combination happens to narrow down to three letters which spell out son—*his* son. To coin a phrase, fathers are funny. Or should I say, frusty?"

"Yeah." He was silent for a moment, unclasping his hands and rubbing them along the sides of the chair. Then grimly he said, "The point is, in some cockeyed way, he was jealous. He had learned, perhaps from Penelope herself, that I was throwing her a jab here and there, amongst a troop of others, I'm certain, because I'm not one to kid himself. But, because it was I—it bothered him. He had been there himself, a long time ago, but nonetheless it bothered him . . . disturbed his rather precarious sense of values. It had nothing to do with morality or immorality—in the sexual sense my father is far from a moral man—but, bluntly, father and son screwing the same woman . . . it shook up the nice, precise balance that is so much a part of him. Perhaps . . . maybe . . . he disliked the fact that there could be a comparison . . . that one woman could judge both father and son . . . I mean, their capacity in the hay. You're a man. You've been around. You know how it is."

"Yeah. I'm a man. I've been around. I know how it is."

"But as far as mood is concerned—*no* mood. No pressure. No nervousness. Not a man who was planning to steal a fortune the next day. Nothing like that."

I stood up and walked around. He remained glued to the rush-bottom but his eyes followed me. I said, "Then you two came back here?"

"Yes."

"When? What time would you say?"

"Oh, about nine-ish. We talked some more."

"Still arguing?"

"No. That sort of got closed out. We chatted—my work, politics, some of the shows on Broadway—and then at a quarter to ten—I remember that definitely: he looked at his watch and I looked at mine—at a quarter to ten he suddenly went into action, he moved fast, in a hurry. He showered, shaved, changed, and got out."

"He what, what, what, and *what*?"

"You know that Dad keeps changes of clothes here."

"Sure I know. But I didn't know that he went off on a date last night. He did, didn't he?"

"Oh, he did. Whether or not it was a business appointment or a gal-date, I don't know. All I do know is that when he saw what time it was, he sure got galvanized. He rushed everything, in a great big hurry."

"Business date or gal-date, he didn't want to be late. You know your father. What had he been wearing?"

"Brown suit, tan shirt, brown tie, brown shoes? He left them all scattered about for me to collect and put away."

"And what did he change *to*? Do you remember?"

"Sure. A charcoal-grey suit, a white button-down shirt, a black knit tie, and black shoes."

"That doesn't clue us to whether it was a man-date or a gal-date, does it?"

"Nope."

"You hung his stuff away?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In the closet in the bedroom."

"Let's have a look-see. Come on, move your ass, boy."

We went together, past the clay and the putty and the plaster of Paris and the finished and unfinished statues in the studio, into the bedroom where he brought out, from the closet, a neatly-hung lightweight wrinkled brown suit: jacket, vest, and trousers. All became more wrinkled as I yanked them from the hanger and examined them. Charles R. Medford sure had been in a hurry; he had failed to transfer four items from the lightweight-brown to the charcoal-grey, all of course unimportant to wherever the hell he had been going. The pockets of the lightweight-brown disgorged, aside from accumulated tufts of lint: one small comb, one packet of heartburn pellets, one fine linen handkerchief, and one little red-leather appointment book. I tossed comb, pellets, and handkerchief, in that order, to Jack Medford, but I pounced upon the little red-leathered booklet as though it were a little red-headed hooklet who was trying to duck out before earning her fee. I scrambled the pages, egged by a stir of hope, until I arrived at a souffle of script on the page Wednesday June Thirteenth. Two innocent soft-boiled inscriptions pancaked up to meet my allegedly hard-boiled eye: *J. M. at studio, 7 P.M.* and coddled beneath that *F. N. at Waldorf, 11 P.M.*

J. M.'s chin was nestled over my shoulder as I made the point with index finger. "Do you know who is F. N.?"

"I have no idea," he said.

Hurriedly I rustled the pages, looking backward. There were

many F. N. notations but on March twenty-ninth there was a ball-pointed indentation: *Frankie Nigle at Waldorf, 8 P.M.* and on April sixteenth there was a pencilled reminder *Frankie Nigle at 515 Fifth, 12:15 P.M.*

"Did he ever mention this guy Frankie?" I said.

"Never."

"F. N. figures for this Frankie Nigle whoever he is, don't you think?"

"I do."

"You and me both."

"Mr. Chambers, do you think these appointments were for the lobby of the *Waldorf,* something like that, or do you think the guy lives there?"

"We can find *that* out fast enough."

I pocketed the appointment book, trotted with him trailing me to the sitting room, but neither of us sat. I used the phone and called the *Waldorf* and said, "I'd like to talk to Frankie Nigle, please."

"Just one moment, please." I got the usual jiggles and then a deep masculine voice said, "Desk."

"Frankie Nigle?"

"Sorry, sir, the party is no longer with us."

"Checked out?"

"That is correct, sir."

"Could you tell me when the party checked out?"

"If you'll hold on for a moment, sir." I held on for three minutes and then the voice returned. "Checked out on Thursday morning, sir."

"Leave a forwarding address?"

"No, sir, no forwarding address."

"Thank you." I hung up, hoisted the phone book, and checked for a Nigle at 515 Fifth Avenue. There was no Nigle at 511 Fifth Avenue. I called Information and asked for a Nigle at 515 Fifth Avenue. "What first name, sir?" said Information.

"Frank."

"Just one moment, sir." One hundred and twenty moments later she came back to me and said, "Sorry, sir, there is no Frank Nigle listed at that address. We have a Nigle Realty Company for that address, though. Is the spelling N-I-G-L-E?"

"That's the spelling."

"Would you want that number, sir?"

"How come there's no Nigle Realty Company listed in the phone book?"

"It's a recent listing, sir. Too late for the present phone book. Do you wish the number?"

"I wish."

She gave me the number and I called it. There was no answer. I called it again. There was no answer. I hung up and the phone rang. I said, "There's one of your impatient customers again."

Jack Medford took up the receiver, said, "Hello," said, "Yes he's here," and gave it to me.

"Hello," I said to the mouthpiece.

"Chambers?"

"Yes."

"Mike Peabody. Like I got messages which said urgent."

"Where are you?"

"Where the hell do you think I am?"

"You home?"

"Well, natch."

"Well, stay there."

"Who died and left you boss?"

"It's very important, Mike."

"For who? For you or for me?"

"For both of us. Now just stay put, will you please?"

"Sure. Why not? I got no other plans."

"Fine. Don't change your plans. I'll be right down."

I hung up, waved bye-bye to Medford, and took off.

SEVEN

THE BRITTANY on West Eighth in the Village was a rugged old-timer remodeled by our chrome-minded wizards of architecture with such modern innovations as self-service elevators up front so that a guy could sneak in his gal for a roll in the hay without impairing morals of the desk-clerk in the rear. It was fifteen stories high, dull beige on the outside and bright tinsel on the inside, with a wide lobby that featured tubular chairs for tubular people, dehydrated divans, spurious marble walls made of venal vinyl, a checkered floor of linoleum tiles so slippery it could have doubled for a hockey rink, piped-in music that even a pie-eyed Pied Piper would have considered too piffling to pipe at his rats, and the usual fluorescent lighting, ubiquitous in our time, created by some vindictive inventor determined to tint upon human flesh the purply discoloration of diseased entrails. Why in all hell we have so long meekly submitted to the ghastly iniquity of fluorescent lighting—which taints even our most succulent foods with the greenish-cold poisonous lavender of septic-tank putrefaction—shall remain, until the inevitable fluorescent revolution, one of the major mysteries bulwarking the stolid conformity of this our generation of conformance.

Quitting the creaky chrome-adorned elevator on the sixth floor, I trod a threadbare carpet along a long narrow corridor, flanked at each end by a telephone booth, to Suite 606 where I punched the button, listened to strident three-toned chimes(which did not come with the room-rent: for chimes the tenant had to chip in), waited impatiently patient until at length the door was swung open by Mike the Pea who, like Atlas in the ads, was dressed in nothing but a pair of bulging elastic briefs.

"Hi," he said unenthusiastically.

"What are *you* costumed for?" I said. "First prize at a drag ball at a fairy convention?"

"Frig you," he said. "I dress like I please. I was resting, relaxing."

"Don't you believe in circulation for *all* of the body while you're relaxing?"

"I circulate like I please and if it don't suit you, blow. I didn't invite you, remember?"

"I remember."

"If you want to come in, come in."

"I want to come in."

"Come in."

I came in.

Suite 606 was a suite in name only. It was one room with a harwood floor and a hodge of furniture podged indiscriminately. It was part bedroom, part living room, and an electric broiler made it part kitchen. Some of the furniture was excellent, some of it lousy. One of the lousy pieces was a rickety dresser on top of which was a silver tray upon which stood many bottles of various potables, glasses, and a cocktail shaker.

"Like a drink?" he said.

"No, thank you."

"Mind if I do?"

'Help yourself."

'Well thanks large," he said. "Nice of you to give me permission. You sure you don't want? I'm going to mix up martinis."

"I'm on the wagon."

"You're full of shit. You're a snot that thinks he's too good to drink with me. You hate my guts, don't you?"

"I don't like them."

"Well, mutual. Just remember I didn't invite you."

"I didn't come for the pleasure of your company, I assure you."

"Oh you assure me," he mimicked in falsetto. "Well let me assure you, pal. The faster you get the hell out of here the better I like it. Now what's so urgent and make it quick."

"You'd better have your drink first."

"Yeah, maybe I better. It'll take the bad taste out of my mouth —that you put there."

"A fist might accomplish that better than a martini."

He turned to me squarely, his grin wide, and beckoned with a finger. "Why don't you step up and try it, pal? I am always happy to oblige a guest."

I was tempted but I passed. "Some other time," I said.

"You want to know something, Mr. Peeper. I think you're a guy with a big mouth and no guts, that's what I think. I think you got a reputation for being a *shtahrker* but I think you made

that reputation with the mouth, not with the hands. That's what I think."

"You've got a right to think," I said. I needed him—there was no sense antagonizing him.

"What I mean, you're a dog, a good-looking dog, but a yellow dog, a yellow dog with a great big mouth. That's what I mean, Mr. Chambers."

I swallowed hard but I held on tight. You give a pig a pinky and he slobbers all over your arm. This little piggy was spewing in my face. I was dying to truss him up for market but there are certain small pleasures that one must forego in the overall interests of the serious work. So I swallowed again and I said, "Enough with the muscles, hey, pal? Go make your drink and let's have our talk. We'll save the muscles for another time."

"Yeah, always another time." His contempt was complete. His smirk was triumphant. He swaggered past me, saying, "You sure you won't join me in a drink, pal? It helps the courage."

I had another answer but I stubbornly stuck to the previous one. "Thanks, but I'm on the wagon."

I tore my mind away from wanting to tear into him. I thought about ice, ice for the chilling of martinis. What about ice cubes? There was no refrigerator in the room. Would he produce the ice cubes from a drawer of the dresser? Cooling out thinking of ice cubes, I watched him open the door of an immense closet that was almost as big as the room. It was filled to bursting with expensive clothes some of which he moved aside to reveal a low, square, compact refrigerator. In a one-room suite like 606, every inch of space had to be utilized: there was probably a stove in the toilet and a horizontal wine-rack beneath the bed. That picture brought a chuckle and the chuckle was good for me: I began to laugh at myself for letting a tick like this Mike get under my skin.

"What's the joke?" he said, coming out of the closet with a tray of cubes.

"Why do you live in a dump like this?" I said. "A guy like you can afford better?"

"Because I like it," he said at the dresser, pulling the lever of the tray and making the ice jump. "It's home base. I know the owner, I know everybody here. I wouldn't have to pay rent for a year and nobody'd bother me with what I've got on *them.*"

"You even use blackmail for room rent, eh, pal?"

"I thought you were going to be nice, Mr. Peeper?"

"I'm trying to be nice. It's flattering, what I said. It's just that you don't belong in a dump like this."

"Look, every guy has got his ups and downs. When I'm up I check into a fancy hotel and live like a prince, but this place I never give up. It's always good to have home base." He plunked ice into the shaker, added vermouth and gin, and stirred. "Sit down," he said. "Take a load off your feet."

I chose one of the good pieces in that strangely furnished room, an excellent traditional, a Louis XV chair with ormolu armrests, beside which was a marble side-table centered with a large flat circular onyx ashtray. I lit a cigarette, leaned back, deposited the burnt match in the tray, and then reared up as though goosed by a Louis XV hornet equipped with an ormolu stinger. The onyx ashtray contained, aside from my brunt match, a card with which I was familiar, a fine parchment calling card simply engraved: PENELOPE ARLINGTON.

"Do you know Penelope Arlington?" I said as lightly as I could skim it.

"What business is that of yours?" he said. He was straining the martini into an oversized cocktail glass.

"I happen to know her myself."

"Big deal," he said.

"It's only I noticed her card here on the table."

"So keep your nose out of my cards."

"Don't tell me that she's come calling on you here?"

"That crazy I'm not."

"They tell me she's out of town."

"So she's out of town. Why are you bugging me with Penelope Arlington?"

"Nothing. I'm just surprised that you two know each other." There was no reason for me to be surprised. Mike the Pea was young and handsome and that was sufficient passport into the hot kingdom of the cool Miss Arlington. "A beautiful woman, isn't she?" I said.

"So? I know plenty of beautiful women." He sipped off the top of the brimming cocktail.

"Do you happen to know Jack Medford too?"

"Yeah, I know him. I met him through Penny—"

"Penny is it? Real cozy."

"I met him through Penny and as far as I'm concerned you can change him up for two dimes and a nickel. You can have him, he's your type. The snotty snotnose type, you know what I mean?" He settled on a wicker settee, quaffed deeply of the martini, put it down on a walnut coffee table beside a porcelain cigarette-box, opened the box, drew out a cigarette, lit it with a tall gold lighter

from off the coffee table, puffed, and lay his arms out along the back of the settee.

He was a handsome man, touching thirty now, blue-eyed and golden-haired, his body smooth and hairless and sun-browned. His legs were powerful, his chest deep, and the biceps of his arms were wrought thickly enough to wreak many harms the recipient of one of which was more than likely to be I. Sooner or later I was going to tussle with this cocky little bastard and from the look of him he was going to be tough to handle. Fair enough. I have the typically American weakness of going soft when the opponent appears to be a sucker. We get caught up in our sympathies and then we catch a haymaker to the jaw. This guy was a prig (and you may pronounce that G as hard as you like) who had rubbed me the wrong way for a long time. When the later arrived at the sooner and we were finally squared away for a round of bout, I had no intention of going soft, and from the sprightly contempt of his arrogant demeanor so convincingly supported by the bulging muscles, *he* had no intention of permitting *my* intention to slacken in the least. Fair enough.

"Is that why you come here?" he said. "To converse about a puke-rich broad named Penny and a quiff-chasing crud named Medford? I mean if this is what you called up about like it's so urgent . . ."

"Hockin Chynik is urgent."

He was reaching for his martini but the reach was breached in mid-air. He eschewed the martini and chewed upon the cigarette. "Hockin Chynik?" he inquired mildly.

"Remember Chynik?"

"Like vaguely," he said but a thespian he wasn't. His bright blue eyes had more giveaway than one of those afternoon shows on television.

"Mike, you're a smart boy, smart enough to know how to duck in the clinches, and I'm going to throw this at you all together because you *are* a smart boy. Hockin Chynik, sprung from the can, has leaped directly into mischief."

"Mischief?"

"Mischief, like murder."

"Murder?" His sigh was a teeter of involuntary tremolo. He bent and this time he made it to the martini, drinking noisily. The glass clattered back to the walnut coffee table and Mike the Pea, his attempt at bravado painful, said, "What in hell you talking about—murder?"

"Last night, in one short rampage, friend Chynik blasted Maxi-

milian Bartlett and broke the neck of Angelina Pisk. The cops are looking for him, and so am I. That's why I'm here."

"Why here?" He was being a nice little boy. Muder sure scared him. Whom does murder not scare?

"Now cut it out with the idiot questions, pal. Chynik was sprung two weeks ago and whom else would he contact than his true-blue bud? Now listen to me, Michael, and strain yourself to listen real hard. Once before in your life I asked you for cooperation, and because way down deep you've got a good streak of self-preservation, you cooperated. Now I'm asking again and I expect cooperation for the same damn reason."

"What's my self-preservation got to do with this . . . with this new Chynik bit?" And for a moment a flicker of his former arrogance flamed again. "And how do I know you're telling me the truth?"

I pointed toward the phone. "Call Homicide. Ask for Detective-lieutentant Louis Parker. Ask for anybody. Ask about Bartlett and Pisk."

He looked toward the phone, looked back to me, drew a last puff on the cigarette and killed it. "What sense would there be in you kidding me?"

"No sense."

"What do you want?"

"I want to know where Chynik is. I want you to play along with me all the way, else you're going to play with the law, or play with Chynik, or play with both."

"I don't get it."

"My pleasure to explain. With the law, like this. You hold out on his whereabouts, you're an accessory after the fact. With murder that's serious and the law plays rough. All your life you've been smart enough to steer clear of the rough deals and I'm depending on you to continue that course. With Chynik, like this. Once upon a time you ratted on him—"

"Me? Ratted? To who?"

"To me. You fingered him for me on that Jennifer Moore job where he finally got caught up with his pants down. Or have you conveniently forgotten?"

"That wasn't ratting. That was—"

"It doesn't interest me what euphemism you care to lay on it. The point is—you ratted on Hockin Chynik and Hockin Chynik doesn't know you ratted on him."

"Because you promised—"

"And I kept my promise. Now I'll make another promise. Unless

right now you cooperate with me—but all the way—and for the same old reason—self-preservation, which seems to make it excusable—unless you cooperate, I promise, so help me, that I'll get word to Hockin Chynik just who put him on that spot, just who ratted on him, just who served as catapult for flinging him into the can for five long years. You know what happens then?"

He was silent.

I pulled a last puff on the butt of my cigarette and smothered it in the onyx ashtray. "Chynik killed Bartlett and Pisk because of their complicity in his commitment. He's probably looking for me for the same reason, which is one of the reasons I'm looking for him. But once he learns that you were Number One, brother, you'll *be the real Number One on his agenda.* He'll either murder you or you'll have to murder him—either way, you're a dead man. So, once again, Mr. Peabody—all personal dislikes to one side—I'm appealing to your better judgment. Either you talk to me, but real good, or I start talking all over this town—about who really stuck the umbrella into Hockin Chynik and opened it up."

The pallor that faded the tan of his suntanned cheeks was encouraging. The white ridge of excitement above his distended nostrils and the shallow-rapid noise of his quickened breathing added to my optimism.

I gave him one last jolt and then hoped like hell.

"I think that by now you know I keep my promises," I said. "One more promise in the hopper. If you talk now, you'll stay clean on this. Not one word from me—to anybody."

He hung a sick grin on his teeth. "Wow," he said softly.

"Yeah, wow," I said.

"Each time it's like you got me over a barrel."

"There'll be other times."

"I can't wait," he said, unconsciously clenching his hands.

"Mayhap some delightful mayhem when we finally tangle," I said. "But, temporarily I trust, we're going to have to postpone our personal pleasures."

"You talk with too many goddamned words."

"Okay, then I'll talk these two final words—*You talk!*" I leaned back on Louis XV and resumed the hoping like hell.

Mike the Pea prodded the porcelain box for a cigarette and tensely scraped the gold lighter for fire. He hammered smoke at his lungs, cocked his head, and then shot his mouth off. "I was with him most of this morning which is why I wasn't in when you were making them telephone calls about urgent. He's a little short of loot and we were figuring angles for the future."

"Like Penelope Arlington?"

"Drop dead. You interested in Chynik or Arlington?"

"Chynik."

"He went down to see his lawyer for an appointment at half past one. He's due back at his apartment at two-thirty which is when I'm supposed to meet him there."

I looked at my watch. It was ten minutes to two. "Where's this apartment?"

"Two-seventy-three West Twenty-sixth. 3 G."

I stood up. "Forget your date with him. Forget it, forever."

"Yeah." He sighed dispiritedly. "How about *our* date?"

"What date?"

"Once, when you *don't* have me over a barrel."

"Oh, that's coming, Michael, I promise, and you know me with promises."

"I'm anxious, Mr. Peeper."

"Me too, Mr. Peabody, except I hate wasting my time."

"I'm a waste of time?"

"Naturally. What would I prove by pasting you around?"

"Prove, maybe, that you're a man."

"I've proved that, to me."

"But never to me."

"It'll work out, Michael. That's what I meant by the promise. I work this town and my side is the other side of your side. I'm expecting, now that you're growing up, that I'll be able to deliver the pasting in the normal course of business. Like that it won't be a waste of time. Or else, if you're as anxious as you say, maybe you ought to look me up."

"When the barrel-bit blows over, maybe I will. I owe you."

"I'll be happy to have you. Now may I use your phone?"

Somehow that sat him back on his settee. "Use," he said.

I called Kaja Knishey, a Yugoslav locksmith, with a store at Twenty-third and Eighth, told him I would pick him up in ten minutes, bade foul farewell to Mike the Pea, and hastened as they say along Madison Avenue, cab-wise (which in New York is crab-wise), to a taciturn genius named Kaja Knishey.

EIGHT

TO HUNT A shark you don't grab a Bikini and go out swimming with bleeding bait. You don't tackle a tiger with the point of a boy-scout badge. You don't whistle at a wolf, jape at a jackal, play footsie with a panther. Castanets won't pacify a python and a string-tie won't lasso a bull. What I mean—there's a weapon for every beast, an offense for every defense, a plan, a scheme, an inchoate plotting for the ultimate chaos of whatever warfare no matter how infinitesimal the war. I was at war with Hockin Chynik and I was fighting fire with fire, pitting steel against steel.

I was pitting Kaja Knishey against Hockin Chynik and I do not mean in the dissonance of nomenclature.

Nothing fails like success, and Hockin Chynik, a successful burglar until five years in the can blew him up into murder, was now pawing at the edge of his nadir, and I had every intention of pushing him over, but I had no intention of going overboard with him. A form of finesse was required and the free-form of the redoubtable Kaja Knishey was eminently suited to the opening sequences of such requirement. If Hockin Chynik was a front-door man, illegal, Kaja Knishey was an all-door man, legal. And what Hockin Chynik had yet to tumble to about the tumblers of locks, Kaja Knishey had already forgotten.

Kaja Knishey was a tiny man, spry at eighty, a bandy-legged bantam of cocky cockalorum, serene in the confidence of his especial genius, with twinkly eyes and wistful gum-gapped smile and a disconcerting habit of talking in monosyllables mostly limited to a laconic "Yah" or "No soap." He was peerless at locks but cheerless as an opponent at the bargain table. His art would have earned him enviable stature as a satrap of the underworld but Kaja was militantly upperworld, a sturdy pinion of law and order one of whose minions, happily, he considered me.

At his store, which was a dank narrow province of locks and keys and strange metallic contraptions on Twenty-third Street, he greeted me—my cab waiting outside—with an amiable tooth-spaced smile which, cannily, grew wider as I spluttered, "Kaj, come on, I'm in a hurry."

"Yah?" he breathed but stood rooted like a midget maple.

"I'm in a hurry, Kaj."

"Yah-yah," he breathe-breathed but stood rooted-rooted like the selfsame maple-maple.

"I've got a couple of doors I want you to open, Kaj."

"Oh yah goot, Mr. Chambers."

"Now come *on!*"

"You in hurry, Mr. Chambers. Kaja no hurry, Mr. Chambers. Kaja got load of work here in shop."

I got the point. "Look, Kaj, it's worth ten bucks to me for you to open a couple of doors, plus I pay the transportation up and back."

"No soap," he said twinkling-eyed but adamant.

"Twenty."

"No soap."

I had a date with a murderer. I had no drive for dicker.

"Fifty," I said sharply but no sharper than the pang it caused within me.

"Yah," he said. "Goot. Work in shop can wait." He seized a bag of tools, I seized him, and the cab engulfed us both, disgorging us at 273 West 26th which was a squat rust-brick edifice to which was affixed a tarnished brass plaque bearing the advice in three horizontal neatly-placed lines: BUCKINGHAM TOWERS, FURNISHED APARTMENTS, NO TRANSIENTS.

The lobby was small, clean, airless, and empty with a locked entrance-door in front, a large metal slab slit for many mail-boxes on one wall, and a perpendicular series of buttons and names on the other wall. The button adjacent to the metal-embossed 3 G bore no name in the slender bracket alongside it. I pressed the button just in case Chynik's lawyer believed in brief conferences (which would make him as anomalous as a sponsor on television who did not believe in ear-splitting commercials) and of course there was no buzz of reply. I gestured to Kaja whose deft hands and dainty instruments quickly delivered us into a large, square, cool inner lobby with a spotless automatic elevator which trundled us upward with a minimum of jerks but returned to normal at the third floor by stopping with the usual massive shudder that almost lurched us loose from our vitals.

Gingerly we vacated the quivering cage and set about through a labyrinth of corridors in quest of 3 G which we found nestled in a dim alcove to the north which was the rear of the house. I laid a thumb on a glistening mother-of-pearl buzzer just in case Hockin Chynik, returned from legal embrace, was hard of hearing,

but Hockin Chynik was not hard of hearing; simply and as per prospect he was not yet at home. I motioned to Kaja and he tinkered with a few touches of damn (there were two locks and both solid) but at length the door was ajar and Kaja was agape with a well-earned grin of victory. "Very good," I whispered. Why I whispered, who knows?

"Yah," he whispered back at me in seemly decorum. "So it's now fifty pineapples for little Kaja."

"You bet. I'll mail you a check." It was not an imposition. We had done business like that before.

"Yah. Fine. Goot. Bye." And Kaja bustled off for another tussle with the elevator.

I closed the door behind me, making sure to turn both locks, and did a rapid reconnoiter. There were three rooms, adequately furnished, period. I looked at my watch. It was twenty after two —about the expected time for the return of my inexpectant host— and it was then that I suddenly realized that I wasn't wearing a gun. You *plan* for your war no matter how infinitesimal, eh what? I was awaiting a murderer and I had come equipped with my lame brain and my bare hands as my entire arsenal. How half-arse arsenal can you get? My first step had been fairly clever if elemental: to catch a murderer you lay a trap. That first step could very easily develop into my last toddle. I had laid my trap but here I was caught in it. Hockin Chynik was due at any minute and I was ready to greet him with open arms but nothing else.

Like that you can get killed.

I re-reconnoitered, seeking a weapon. Somewhere the guy had a gun—remember he had pinked Bartlett rather thoroughly—and I didn't think he'd be sporting a pistol in the peaceful pursuit of powwow with a mouthpiece (or should that be blahblah with a barrister?) but of course I was wrong. Thorough search turned up neither gun nor holster but did turn up, wrapped in a terry-cloth towel in the bottom drawer of a chiffonier, a long wooden-headed ice-pick with a filed point that was sharper than the tongue of a termagent.

So now once again I considered myself clever as I took up battle-station behind the door with the second part of my plan clear as crystal in my mind. Hockin Chynik, all unaware, would make his entrance and I would range up behind him, point first, prick him to rigidity, frisk him for gun, transfer it to me, and cow him with it while I made my call for the bulls. If he stayed cowed until we got bulled, all well and good. But if bovine-brained he

went berserk it would be necessary to dress him down as a side of beef.

Arrayed for fray, I lurked, ice-pick-dirked, in the murk behind the door, waiting until I was sagging in the quiet venetian-blinded room, but then at last the jerk of key in lock perked me back to rapt attention.

The door opened. And the door closed.

But I was not behind him. I was beside him.

He moved quickly, in one spring, out of range of ice-pick thrust, and smiled somewhat pleasantly—*quite* pleased as I could perceive in that one split-second—before he drew the gun and without further ceremony commenced a flurry of target practice. Of course I was a blurred target. I am as firmly against standing still to get killed as I am against sin. The happy smile had hardly lighted his face before I had left my feet and lit into him in what was, considering the circumstances, a rather creditable tackle. His reflexes, however, and the swift action of his automatic, were excellent. Three bullets in rapid fire were detonated, one of which hit me, before I hit him. The gun flounced to the floor and bounced right between my feet but I did not dare stoop for it because Hockin Chynik, solid as a brick outhouse, was still vertical although jarred back several paces, and he was churning for return. He came, aimed at my midsection, head down and knees up, in a powerful bull-rush. This was it now, one way or another, and neither of us was going to ladle up half-measures. I would be a live toreador or a dead private richard, depending upon my luck and my agility. If he got to that gun before I stopped him, I was dead, no question. I did not have a toreador's cape but I had that ice-pick and so I waited, heaving for breath and praying for luck, until, in his rush, he was at me; then I side-stepped and up-punched the ice-pick with all of my strength. I felt it go in right up to the hilt and then he was beyond me, striking the wall, and then he turned, still upright, and came back toward me in a weaving, jiggling, unnatural dance.

I was sick, transfixed, looking at him. It was as though he were a disfigured Cyclops, blood streaming out of his nose. He had one eye! The socket of the other eye was filled with the wooden hilt of the ice-pick, deeply imbedded. Still upright, still staggering on his feet, he tried to talk but it was a red horrible unintelligible gurgle as blood, in a surging gush, burst from his mouth. Then he whirled about in his crazy dance—and I could see the gleam of the point of the ice-pick protruding from the back of his head—and then he fell into an armchair, supine, arms spread, his one dead glaring eye

fixed upon me, inescapably. No matter how far I went from him, or how near, or at what angle, that one dead eye followed me, peculiarly crinkled at one corner, railing at my queasiness, laughing at me in a ghastly malevolence.

Then I did not look upon him again.

I went to the bathroom where I was thoroughly ill. Then I attended to my wound but it was no wound. The bullet had nicked the left hinge of my jaw, hardly even a crease, with pinpoints of blood quickly stemmed by the pressure of a cold towel. Then I came out and called down to Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker and was told to stay where I was and wait. I waited. I sat in a comfortable chair and smoked many cigarettes but the comfortable chair had its back squarely turned to the one dead derisive eye that remained to Hockin Chynik somehow triumphant.

NINE

IN A MILD way, because cops are always mild of praise for any other except a brother-cop, I was certified although not stamped under seal as a hero because I had killed a killer and it is a rule of thumb supported by fingers of morbid logic that whoever kills a killer is a hero. Ballistics had bedizened Chynik with the mantle of murderer—the bullets in Bartlett had been shot from Chynik's automatic—and since, haphazard or no, I had delivered Chynik I was mildly a hero. Affidavits all around closed out Pisk, Bartlett, Chynik, and the case for Parker. The loose end as to how I had discovered Chynik's address was tied off by my statement that I had inquired indiscriminately at various watering places of various anonymous and unknown stoolies and one of their tips had turned up true. I was not pressed for every facet of detail because who presses when a case clears the books with such dispatch, fortuitous or otherwise. Parker was in charge, and Parker was happy, and Parker bought me three shots of congratulatory resuscitation in a rich oak-paneled booth of a well-appointed saloon-restaurant called *Ye Olde Smoky Lox And Cheery Herring Tavern Inc.* Parker had two shots of congratulatory resuscitation for himself and then, after one blade-shivering congratulatory clap on my shoulder (par for the course), he hied off for whatever murder would furnish his new order of business while I moped alone in the booth ordering a lunch of two lox-on-toasted-bagel sandwiches and coffee.

I was happy that Parker was happy, but I was not happy. Twice now I had permitted Mike the Pea his green pastures when instead he should have been enclosed in the pen. Once he had been the finger in Chynik's pie, and now he had known the whereabouts of the said Chynik and had probably been a part of the recent Chynik's recent nocturnal peregrinations. Furthermore, what with Penelope's card at Mike's pad, if those two unworthies had not been planning a grave robbery at Arlington's, then I was as batty as a mausoleum in Transylvania. Twice now I had bunted the pea to get at the pod. The pod, finally, was extinct, but the pea was merrily rolling along gathering no remorse.

In a sudden ridiculous burst of preventive meddling, I temporarily abandoned my smoked salmon for a steamy clambake in the phone booth. I called Penelope Arlington but the wire served up her Service. "Miss Arlington is out of town, sir," burped the burdened voice. (As you know, the Sisterhood of Answer Service provides that the gals must pass an ennui-test with flying callers before they can win their head-sets.) "Miss Arlington is expected to return late this afternoon, sir. A message, please?"

"No message, thank you."

"Thank *you*, sir," quothe the bored voice and the plug was pulled with eardrum-perforating alacrity. (Also, as you may *not* know, there exists a preliminary competition in the weeding-out process of the heady set—the infamous eardrum-perforating alacrity-pull, less sticky but just as demonic as the more subtly dangerous, if more frequently practiced, taffy-pull.)

I hung up and sat thinking and stinking in the unventilated cubicle. Force of habit closes the doors of all phone booths all over the world for the privacy of such top-secret advices as "What time will you be free tonight, baby?" or "Sweetie, I'm stuck at the office, I'll be home late tonight, don't worry, I'll eat out, I'm dying for some Italian food anyway," and then the ensuing babble of top-secret drivel which is the scintillating dialogue presaged by such brilliant but top-secret opening. I sat and stank in that steamy crotch-wetting enclosure because I had another phone call to make but perhaps because of the poison of my own carbon dioxide or the contagion of inertia out of ennui from Answer Service, it had slipped what passes for my mind, so I just sat and stank, mullingly, and then it came to me. I inserted coins for communication and received connection to the New York National Bank and asked for Mr. Donald P. K. Sloan and was told, of course, that Mr. Donald P. K. Sloan was not there and what message please? I hung up, bitterly regretting my cooling coffee and drying lox and petrifying bagel, and I fished within my soggy clothes until I landed the scribbled memo-hunk that he had so kindly donated to the cause. I called him at home and got him at once.

"Mr. Sloan?" I inquired.

"Yeah, uh huh," he said as befits a bank president.

"Peter Chambers here."

"Oh how *do!* So good of you to call me!" Much more trashy but much more president-like.

"Mr. Sloan, is there anything new on Charlie?"

"Nothing. Not one word. There are instructions to call me here, at any time, day or night, if any information whatsoever pierces this

darned vexing mystery. This has begun to assume all the proportions of a vexing situation, sir, vexing, vexing. I am just beside myself, Mr. Chambers. Beside myself. Beside myself."

"Yes yes," I said.

"Yes yes," he agreed.

"Mr. Sloan?" I said.

"Yes yes Sloan here, Chambers."

"Mr. Sloan, do you know a Frank Nigle?"

"A frank what?"

"Frank, a first name."

"Ah, Frank a first name. Frank what was that?"

"Nigle."

"Nigle?"

"Nigle."

"How do you spell it?"

"N-I-G-L-E."

"Oh, Frank Nigle."

"That's it, Frank Nigle."

"Um." Pause. "No, never heard of him. Who is Frank Nigle?"

My ray of hope dissipated, I said, "A friend of Charlie's. I'd thought, perhaps—"

"No, no, no Frank Nigle. Never heard the name. Now Mr. Chambers, if you run across any information, anything at all that might pierce this vexing situation, no matter how slightly, feel free, please feel free to call me, at any time, day or night, I'm answering the phone myself. I'm hoping against hope that Charlie himself will call. I've made the statement, a public statement, that I'm answering the phone myself, myself. No interference, no intermediary, I'm manning the telephones personally . . ."

"Yes manning personally," I said. "Good for you, sir. Good show. Carry on. I'll disconnect now, sir, so that the wires can be free and flowing."

"Thank you, Mr. Chambers. And remember, don't hesitate to call, any time, day or night."

"I'll do that, sir, if I get pierced by any information that can hex the situation."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Chambers. So good of you to call."

"Goodbye, Mr. Sloan."

"And a very goodbye to you, sir."

I hung up and dragged feet back to my table where I had it cleared of dregs and had it refurbished with more coffee, hot. I sipped coffee, hot, dredged up Charlie's appointment book, and sipped more coffee, hot, while I tried to decipher his hieroglyphics.

The little red book was a year-book and since only six months of the year had passed I had only half the book to study. Some of the names, including my own, I knew, and I was able to match up initials where old Charlie, grown chary, had narrowed us down. Actually I was interested solely in the spectral F. N. because of Charlie's appointment with that abbreviated gent for eleven o'clock the night before he had walked out with the hundred gees the afternoon after. I pored over each page with the spilling scrutiny of a horseplayer's perusal of a racing-form in an endeavor to discover whether F. N. could fit any other but Frankie Nigle, but as my friend Kaja Knishey would say—no soap. F. N. was Frankie Nigle whoever the hell that was, and nobody else. The initials appeared many times, the written-out name, twice. The initials first appeared on April fifth as *F. N., meet for dinner at Four Seasons, 6:15 P. M.* and last appeared on June fourteenth as *F. N. at 515, 12:10 P. M.* The written-out name first appeared on March twenty-ninth as *Frankie Nigle at Waldorf, 8 P. M.* and last appeared on April sixteenth as *Frankie Nigle at 515 Fifth, 12:15 P. M.* He had had frequent appointments with the initials, sometimes as many as four a week; there were but two appointments with the written-out name.

I sighed, folded away the appointment book, finished the coffee, paid my check, quit *Ye Olde Smoky,* hailed a cab, gave him my home address, squeezed in, settled back—and then fell apart in a scramble of knocking knees and flying elbows and quivering toes in the longest-delayed double-take since the semi-clement times of Mark Twain.

"Halt!" I bellowed at the pilot up front.

"What the *hell!"* came that helmsman's turgid response as the boat rocked in a frightened swerve that capsized me.

"Halt! Halt!" I commanded, imperative tone now muffled since I was speaking from the belly of the ship, busily engaged in collecting myself from the floorboards. Regaining perch I said "Halt" again to my cohort up front.

"Halt my holy ass, if you'll excuse the expression," he replied. "You can holler the hell all the halt you want but I just plain can't halt in the middle of this goddam traffic, now can I?"

"No, no, don't halt, I didn't mean halt," I said, more calm now that I was safely if precariously back on my seat.

"Jesus," he mourned, "but I get all the nuts. It's my fate."

"I wish a change," I said.

"You and me both, brother."

"No, no. I wish to change the previous direction."

"You mean to halt or *not* to halt? Oh mother-mine, why do all the screwballs fall in on me?"

"Now look here," I said gathering my dignity like a tattered cape about me. "I'm a paying passenger in this cab which is a public conveyance and I have a right to expect—"

"Cut it out, Mac. Please! I'm asking nice. Lectures I don't need. Lectures I get enough when I go home to the goddam missus. Lectures on the job I need like a hole in the head. First you scare the living bejazzus out of me with this halt bit, and now you're off on this lecture tour."

"I'm sorry." I said. "I got excited."

"You all right now?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Not excited?"

"No. I'm fine, thank you."

"All right, sir. Please let us start from scratch before the halt. What is it you wish of me, sir?"

"I wish to change our course."

"Yes sir. Very good, sir. From where to where?"

"My original directions were to take me to Central Park South and Sixth. Correct?"

"That is correct, sir."

"I should like to change that to Five-fifteen Fifth Avenue."

"And that's the whole *shmear?*"

"Whatever that is, it is."

"So, Christ, what was all the excitement? It's on our way. Won't cost you like not even a penny more on the meter. Fact, it'll cost you less."

I refrained from riposte. I beat a retreat from further persiflage. I cuddled silently in a corner, jostlingly turning the pages of Charlie Medford's appointment book to make sure I wasn't crazy. After one last murmur from my piqued pilot—*"Mama mia,* how come all the oddballs get wished on me?"—the silence was complete but his glazed gaze through the rear-view whenever he got the chance was, although not baneful, painful. True, I was entitled, but I couldn't take it, so I chewed my cuddle in the other corner where, unglazedly ungazed upon, I glazedly gazed upon Charlies Medford's appointment book. No matter I tried to control myself, my hands trembled. Not matter I frantically sought for composure, it fitfully evaded me. No matter how slowly and logically I tried to assemble the facts, they erupted in an angry rash.

All right. Slowly now. Steady away. Let us concentrate on names and initials but let us also concentrate on dates and times and

places. There was an entry that linked Frankie Nigle to 515 Fifth Avenue. At Jack Medford's place Information had vouchsafed information about a Nigle Realty Company at 515 Fifth. So? Even a cuddled boob in a bouncing cab could fancy himself an astute detective by arriving at conclusions that were long at the depot impatiently awaiting him—F. N. was Frankie Nigle and Frankie Nigle was Nigle Realty Company at 515 Fifth Avenue. Good? Great? Conceded? Fine. Now let us lay that away and turn to the page of June fourteenth in Charlie's book where he had last inscribed the initials F. N.

F. N. at 515, 12:10 P. M.

Today was Friday, June fifteenth. Yesterday was Thursday, June fourteenth. Yesterday, Thursday, on June fourteenth, at twelve o'clock noon, Charles R. Medford had bilked his bank of a hundred thousand golden apples. He had gone to lunch affectionately attached to an attache case loaded with loot. The bank was situated at 500 Fifth Avenue. 515 Fifth Avenue was practically across the street. At twelve o'clock he had allegedly bilked the bank. At ten minutes after twelve he had an appointment across the street. Whatever that may prove to you—it *proved* to me that Charlie was no crook. For some reason he was carrying money to the Nigle Realty Company but if *you* were planning to steal would you make an entry in your appointment book as to where you were going on this cash and carry deal?

"Not on your goddamned life," I said.

"What the hell is *now?" inquired my cab driver.*

"What's with you?" I said.

"Why the hell you cursing, Mac?"

"Who the hell is cursing, Mac?"

"Look, pal, enough is enough. Cursing I don't need from a passenger. Cursing I get plenty from my goddam missus at home."

The cab stopped.

"You planning to throw me out?" I said.

"Buster, if you please—did you want Five-fifteen Fifth?"

"Yes I wanted Five-fifteen Fifth."

"This is Five-fifteen Fifth."

"Oh," I said and climbed out and searched for payment and found nothing smaller than a five and gave him the five and did not wait for change.

"Mama mia," I heard him say as the cab took off but lurchingly.

In the spacious lobby the huge directory was a jumble of the usual miniscule characters spelling out names and room numbers in

type so small the whole appeared as a mosaic of abstraction in black and white fit for hanging (but hanging) in one of our modern galleries (where of course it would fetch a fabulous price if lavishly framed and appended with apt title such as *Three Nudes Descending Into Two Hillocks And One Hump*). There exists a leasehold conspiracy in the business-buildings of the City of New York to render the data of their directories all but invisible unless you come equipped with telescopic lenses. I moved in close on that big board, and peered long and myopically, until I was able to discern that Nigle Realty dwelt in 1602. Then I backed off and sturdily steered my course to a gilt-ridden elevator which performed swiftly and faultlessly under the guidance of an operator in the attire of an admiral and in the splice of a trice I was clicking my heels on a marble floor to 1602 which was a thick wood door with its lock contained in a strong brass knob impervious to the twist of my fist.

So once more I strode the marble to the flagship and the admiral pushed his buttons and we hankered away in a zoomed plummet to the lobby where from a phone booth I called Knishey and spoke quickly. "Knish?" I said.

"Yah," he said.

"Chambers again." I had no stomach for haggle now and waived all wiggle toward higgle. Properly prostrate, I laid it right out on the line. "If you can get to Five-fifteen Fifth Avenue within the next ten minutes and open a simple lock for me, there's an additional fifty bucks for you. Okay?"

"Yah," he said.

"I'll be waiting for you on the sixteenth floor."

"Yah," he said and nine minutes later he hiked up his sleeves, did his magic, and shrugged that he was done.

"That check will be for a hundred," I said.

"Yah," he said and went away and I turned the knob, entered, but did not go far. What I had tried to pull on Hockin Chynik was now being pulled on me, but better, because this was a wider door with a bigger swing. I heard a rustle and then I was hit, hard but not too hard, on the back of the head, and as I whirled about, crumpling, I fought with every fibre of my being to keep my eyes open, and I saw him—*I saw him!*—before the door closed behind him and the darkness opened for me.

TEN

I AWOKE UNREFRESHED from enforced sleep. It had been a short nap: the patient was hardly under before he was up. Of course the anesthetic had been local and lightly applied: this Frankie Nigle —if the guy I had seen *was* Frankie Nigle—had a delicate touch and small malice, or so I thought as I came out of the ether. I was to suffer a marked change of that opinion within a very few minutes. Meanwhile I touched the front of my hand to the back of my head and it came away with a diagnosis of mild lump and no abrasion. Reassured, I got to my feet, surprisingly unwobbly, and looked about.

I was in a splendidly accoutered outer office with all the appurtenances of achievement from red-mahogany walls to grey-steel secretary's desk to red-mahogany filing cabinets to water cooler with a grey-steel base and a push-button contrivance for the popping out of sanitary paper cups. I pushed a button and popped a sanitary cup and drank sloppily and curled the cup to a sanitary ball and pitched it with antiseptic accuracy for a rimless two-pointer in a red wicker basket. I dutifully yanked at the drawers of the filing cabinets all of which of course were closed and then gave my attention to two doors in the rear wall. There was a door on the right and there was a door on the left and being a detective and therefore accustomed to rapid deduction I rapidly deduced that the door on the right was the entrance to the right-hand inner office and the door on the left the entrance to the left-hand inner office. Do I hear applause?

As a good American, I went first to the right. I opened that door to a well-furnished room, immaculate and undisturbed, with a large electric-clock showing the time to be five minutes to four. Immaculately undisturbed rooms leave me immaculately undisturbed, so I went—you should pardon the expression—to the left. The room on the left was neither immaculate nor undisturbed. Along one wall there were newspapers in a pile about three feet high, and up front centre, upon the long flat side of its parallelogram, lay a shiny-new black steamer trunk. Close examination

showed that it was ticketed to Miss Antoinette Kooz, Beverly-Hilton Hotel, Beverly Hills, California (no return address) and closer examination revealed that the trunk was not yet locked. I lifted the lid and found Charlie Medford.

Charlie was stacked for shipping. He lay on one side with his knees tucked to his chin and his arms crossed over his chest. He was tightly lodged against the buttress of many crumpled newspapers so that he would not jiggle on his journey to Antoinette Kooz. I pulled out the papers and plucked out poor Charlie. He was very dead but not yet smelly with a small round hole between his eyebrows which served as an exclamation point for the expression of utter astonishment on the rest of his face. Charlie had been punctured by a pellet from a small-bore weapon and judging from the attitude that had stiffened on his face nobody could have been more shocked by the news of his death than he. He was wearing a charcoal-grey suit, button-down white shirt, black knit tie, and black shoes. His pockets had been emptied and there was no sign of his attache case.

Just then a sudden rap of knuckles on the outside door caused me in consternation to lean upon Charlie but Charlie was in no condition to support me. We both fell across the steamer trunk but I was able to get up. Hurriedly I debouched from the inner office, delayed for the closing of that door, darted across the outer office and opened the door to a swarthy man in a vizored cap.

Smilingly he announced, "Railway Express."

"Railway!" I expressed.

He mistook bewilderment for bedevilment. "I know we was to be here for the pickup at five o'clock, sir. Only we was passing through on a job here in the building, and I figured if the shipment was ready we could knock off two birds with one stone."

"The bird is knocked off but the shipment isn't ready."

"Come again, sir?"

"The shipment isn't ready."

"Okay sir. Yes sir. Then we'll see you at five o'clock, hey?" He smiled again. "You can't get killed for trying. Goodbye, sir."

I closed the door. Charlie had been killed for trying—whatever the hell he *had* been trying. I went back to the inner office, skirted Charlie, draped myself in the expensive chair behind the massive expensive desk, and sewed up a call to the Beverly-Hilton in California. No person to person. Direct. Frankie Nigle had dashed off with a hundred thousand dollars. I was certain he wouldn't mind if I dashed off one lousy long-distance call to California. If he did mind . . .

"Go ahead, New York," said the operator.

"Beverly-Hilton?" I said.

"Beverly-Hilton Hotel," said the switchboard.

"Miss Kooz, please."

"What was that name, sir?"

"Kooz. Antoinette Kooz."

"Just one moment, sir." Through the pause I heard the sibilance of rustling papers. "I'm sorry, sir. There is no Antoinette Kooz registered here."

"I didn't think there was."

"I beg pardon, sir?"

"Thank you." I hung up.

I luxuriated in the luxurious desk-chair, tilting it back on its nonsqueaking expensive fulcrum, trying to knit together some of my wooly ideas. Charlie Medford was dressed in exactly the same clothes he had worn when he had left Jack's studio for his Wednesday night appointment at eleven o'clock. Charlie Medford was, notoriously, a fastidious man: he would never wear the same outfit on successive days. Yet he *had* worn the same oufit to work on Thursday when he had eloped with his bulging attache case, as witness the fact that he was lying here now in those selfsame clothes. Wednesday night, therefore, had been a long night—good or bad—and he had been too tired or too drunk or too sleepless to have the energy to change; else, perhaps he had not gone home at all on Wednesday night. Either way no cogitation on my part could possibly bear fruit—so I quit that dappled orchard as plumbed out of any currant of clue for me. Next!

Next was Thursday. On Thursday at noon Charlie had crossed the street, from bank to realty company, on the short journey that was to be his last. He was carrying the money which, of course, was the reason for the bullet between his eyes. There was a deal of trust going on between him and Nagle—a fiduciary deal—and he was shocked to death by the bullet as was written in that final look of astonishment on his face. But that was Thursday and today was Friday and Charlie was still here. That one was not too tough to tear apart.

When you are saddled with a dead body you just don't canter off, else you're liable to hear the hoof-beats of the posse behind you. Nigle had a body on his hands and a body is no buddy when you need room for movement. It takes time to cop out on a corpse. Why Nigle had not prepared in advance?—once again I was in the dappled orchard that yielded no fig for me. Perhaps he had not planned to kill Charlie. Perhaps that been a sudden unex-

pected gambit in the gamble of expediency. Whatever, he was stuck with a cadaver and you just do not cooly clear out on a cadaver if you wish to keep clear of the hot breath of the law. It takes time to make arrangements and when the funeral is out of a business office there is always the threat of the innocent charwoman.

It takes time for the purchase and delivery of a steamer trunk, it takes time for the purchase and delivery of stacks of yesterday's newspapers, and it takes time for the conveyance and safe deposit of a hundred thousand bundles of joy. It takes time for Railway Express to pony up an appointment and Railway Express will not lay a special track just because you have a tie with an urgency. Also the inevitable tick of necessary personal chores must bug at you like chiggers. And so time stretches out from Thursday to Friday and the body of your business has its remains in the office. So what about the charwoman?

The cleaning-ladies do their dirty work in the dust of the evening. You cannot risk leaving death as debris else a pall will settle on your funeral arrangements before you have consigned the corpse to whatever its eventual embalmment. There is no way to circumvent a charwoman except by being physically present and waving her off with, "Not now, not now, please, I'm busy." But you cannot rest on that. More than likely, like it or not, she will be back later at night brimming to the bosom with mops, pails, shovels, vacuum cleaners, and good intentions. A charwoman, like a vampire, disappears only at dawn: Frankie Nigle must have stayed over with Charlie Medford until Friday morning, protecting them both from the innocent fangs of the invading charwoman.

Activities recommenced on Friday and Charlie was almost ready for shipment to the nonexistent Antoinette Kooz, when I barged in. Once Charlie was en route, Nigle could dispose the arrangements for his own dispersal. He would have the time and the freedom to make his moves unencumbered unless Railway Express suddenly discovered it was doing duty as a hearse, and there was small likelihood of that. The human body takes time to rot; bodies have lain around for weeks before being discovered; many days must pass before the odors are sufficient to arouse attention—by then Frankie Nigle would have thoroughly vanished. That completed my cerebrations, such as they were, right or wrong, except for one question—why had I been conked rather than croaked—and that answer came quickly. Nigle had heard me fiddling with the outside door and then I had gone away, he hoped, for good. But I had returned. He did not know what I had reported or to whom or who or how many would follow my entrance. Once I came in,

he had to get out—and take his chances. His sweet plan had struck a sour note and he was now on the run, playing it by ear as he went along.

That was it. I could be wetter than a porpoise on purpose, but those were my conclusions and I could drown with them unless a raft of new facts rescued me. Of *one* conclusion, however, I was certain. *I had seen Frankie Nigle and Frankie Nigle had not seen me*—provided that guy on the run was Frankie Nigle. When I had opened the door, he had been behind it. Once I had entered he had been behind *me*. He had had no opportunity to see my face. He had conked, I had whirled, but he was running, without a backward glance. I had seen him. He had not seen me. And he had no idea that I *had* seen him. That gave me some kind of advantage, I was certain, but what do you do with an advantage when there is no one to take advantage *of*? You got up off your chair and you do a tour of exploration hoping to find some peg on which to hang your advantage.

I found nothing.

A tool-box in a cabinet in the right-hand room provided me with a cold chisel and a hot hammer with which to wreak wreckage and before I was through the place fairly reeked of wreckage. I broke open all the filing cabinets. I broke open every locked drawer of every desk in the joint. I went through more files than a hardware clerk taking inventory. I scanned more correspondence than a lonelyhearts editor during a full-moon in a leap year.

Nothing! I found one incongruous item—a length of brand-new rope in the bottom drawer of the desk at which I had been sitting—but I found not one speck of material concerning Nigle Realty. There was a great deal of material—*all* the goods in a way of speaking—about a Universal Import Limited, an agency purchasing merchandise in bulk from foreign factories on behalf of numerous individual clients here. The Limited of Universal was apparently strictly construed—the firm was limited to one man: Sam Silverman. I learned that Sam had a thriving business, that Sam had left on April First for a six-months' trip to Europe, but I could discover no link or tie or collar or cuff that could connect Universal Import to Nigle Realty.

I was finished. I laid away hammer and chisel and took up the phone. I called Jack Medford, Jack Medford was not at home, and I was relieved. I had attempted to do my duty and I was happy that it ended as only an attempt. I detest being the harbinger of disaster. The kid would find out soon enough. There was no hurry. There was nothing he could do. Let him enjoy whatever he was

enjoying while he had the time. I sighed and started to call the cops and then tucked the receiver back in its cradle. Cops! You push your luck with cops and your luck can push right back at you. You can be pushed into a detention pen and you can languish there in lingering dudgeon until your sprightly lawyer finally springs you but even wholesale that costs in time and money. You can be questioned and cross-questioned until you are cross with wrath and cross-eyed with fatigue and then it begins all over again. I didn't need it. I couldn't use it. This had been a day of death and I had emerged so far as a mild hero. Pisk, Bartlett, Chynik —but now Charlie Medford. How would I explain *my* finding him? How would I explain *not* turning my information over to the cops, my barging in solo, my letting this Frankie Nigle wriggle loose?

I was finished here. I was done. I was all through. But my friend was lying dead over a steamer trunk. There was nothing more that I could do but there was certainly a hell of a lot more that cops could do—so it was pertinent that I turn over all of my facts. I sighed again and lifted the phone again and called Homicide. I pinched my nostrils together and squeaked in a thin soprano: "Lieutenant Parker, please."

Counterpoint to my soprano was a deep baritone. "Not in."

Of course not. A city of many millions has many murders. Parker was not sitting around waiting for me to deposit cases in his lap. "Is Lieutenant Generoso there?" I said.

"Who's calling?"

"John Maxwell. Please tell him it's important."

"Hang on."

I hung. Detective-lieutenant Anthony Generoso was young and snippy and educated and sarcastic and stuck on himself but he was active, intelligent, thorough and capable, full of beans and ambition.

"Generoso here," he said.

I talked quickly. "There's a dead man at Five-fifteen Fifth Avenue, Suite 1602. His name is Charles R. Medford and he's the guy that walked out with the hundred gees from the New York National. He was killed by Frankie Nigle of the Nigle Realty Company, Five-fifteen Fifth Avenue. Mr. Nigle used to live in the *Waldorf Astoria.* Checked out Thursday morning. Okay? You got that?"

"Who's this?"

"Did you get all of that?"

"Not all. Would you please repeat?"

That gag was older than Lieutenant Generoso. He was motioning to an assistant to trace the call while the wire was alive. That

was okay by me. Let them trace. It would only lead them to where I was directing them. It wouldn't lead them to me because I wasn't going to tarry long enough.

I repeated as requested and hung up. Almost at once the phone rang. Already, they were checking back. I placed Charlie's appointment book on the floor near him and got out. Outside, as I inspected the door of 1602, I could hear the phone still ringing.

Nigle Realty Company was printed on the centre of the door in neat gold lettering but comparatively fresh. *Universal Import Limited* could have been recently obliterated and the new name printed over it. I shrugged. Downstairs, I inspected the Big Board. *Universal Import Limited* was still listed at 1602. I shrugged again. I went out and flagged a cab and went home. I shaved again and finally showered. Then I dressed and went to Alfred Surf's party.

ELEVEN

IT WAS one of those charming swarming parties where nobody can find anybody. Friday afternoon is the prime time of the free-loader and the cuckoos were enmeshed en masse. Surf's huge triplex was awash with people, room after room seething with a sea of small talk and large drinks. The purpose of the party was to launch Vickie Wiggleston's new book, *Of Lice and Ladies,* but the launching-party must have disembarked early because this was no launching party, this was a wild brawl of beautiful drunks oiling up for a slick weekend. The joint was as rife with chicks as a coop in Jersey which suited me fine: I was ripe for relaxation. I could not find Alfred Surf and I did not know Barry Howard, so I set my sails for a plush blonde with a lush figure and shoved off, but I had hardly got three sheets to the wind before I was intercepted by a remarkable frigate named Topsy Twits.

Topsy Twits was only gorgeous. For one long numb moment I wondered why in all hell I had misspent a month assiduously ducking out on her. Familiarity breeds contempt but why it should breed discontent—let the psychiatrists answer. I was nuts about Topsy Twits but instead of running after, I had been running away. Perhaps the sheer incongruity shot it home to me. Topsy Twits in the guise of an intellectual at a literary party was about as appropriate as marijuana in the guise of pot at a vicar's tea. Topsy Twits was twenty-four; she was tall, tan and terrific; she was raven-haired, sloe-eyed and faster-hipped than Waytt Earp.

"Well, well," she said. "Fancy meeting you at *this* fancy meeting."

"And a resounding vice versa to you," I said.

"If you belong, I belong, my dear private cockeye. What are you, a literary light or something?"

"Whatever, I can't hold a candle to you."

"Don't ever try. Candles I can live without. Where were you rushing in such a hurry?"

I pointed. "The blonde in the blue dress."

She looked. "Oh, that one? Take it easy. I'll introduce you."

For a gal who had been calling me every day for a month, Miss Twits didn't seem very anxious to hang on to me—which made me more anxious for her and less anxious for the blonde but the better part of discretion kept me flying although my ego was sinking.

Airily I said. "You know her?"

"I met here here."

"Quite attractive."

"I agree."

What had happened to Topsy Twits? Once upon a time she used to be jealous. My ego continued its descent. Lamely getting off the blonde I said, "What *are* you doing here, Tops?"

"I'm going to write a book."

"You're going to write a *what*?"

"The story of my life."

"Tops, are you kidding?"

"*I'm* not, but maybe I'm *being* kidded. That's why I've been calling you, but you've been out of town. When'd you get back?"

"Today," I said. "But, Topsy, I don't get it. You've been calling *me* to find out whether *you're* being kidded." Sadly I added, "That the only reason you've been calling?"

"Should there be another reason?"

"I . . . er . . . Well . . . I thought you liked me."

"Look, private cockeye. Topsy knows when she's been given the air. I never chased a guy in my life and I'm not starting with you."

My ego was now flat down to my arches. "What air? Who gave you the air? I've been out of town."

"So? You can always call. You can drop a line. You didn't call, you didn't drop a line. Topsy can take a hint."

"Tops, you've got it all wrong. I . . . I was in Chicago on a top-secret-type deal. I was . . . er . . . being watched . . tailed all the time. I couldn't call, I couldn't write, I was . . . er . . . incognito."

"You're getting mixed up, sweet private cockeye."

"Mixed up?"

"First you said Chicago."

"I—"

"Now you're saying Cognito."

"Saying *what*?"

She drew a deep breath. When Topsy draws a deep breath, strong men lose theirs. "First you said you were in Chicago, and now you're saying you were in Cognito. A good fibber sticks to one lie."

"Oh. No no. Cognito's a suburb of Chicago. But that's water under the bridge, sweet. I'm back in town now and I'll be at the club to see you—tonight." She was doing her terping in a downtown club called *Egyptian Gardens*.

"I'm off tonight."

"Well then we can have like a date, you know?"

She pouted ruby-red lips. When Topsy pouts ruby-red lips, strong men turn emerald-green. "Don't you even want to know why I've been calling you all month?"

"You told me. To find out whether you were being kidded."

"About what?"

"The book."

"What book."

"The story of your life."

"Kidded by whom?"

She had me. I preferred to reverse that. "Honey," I said, "We'll talk about it tonight on our date."

"I want to talk about it now."

"Sure," I said.

"Alfred Surf," she said.

"Beg pardon?" I said.

"Alfred Surf. He says that he wants me to do this book. I know that you know him. So? Is it a pitch or is it on the level? You know him. What kind of a guy is he?"

Ah, world. Everybody pitches his own kind of spitball. A theatre producer promises a lassie he may work out a lead for her. A motion-picture producer promises the broad a wide angle. A television guy zooms in on a chick with a low promise of high jinks in a situation comedy. What can a publisher promise a tomato? A patch of fame in the way of a tome. What else?

"How did you meet Alfred Surf?" I said.

"I didn't meet him. He met me."

"How?"

"He came down to the club one night. He admired my work. He's a belly-dancer fan."

"Or a fan-dancer's belly."

"Now look. Don't get sore. He's been very proper."

"Properly *im*proper?"

"All he wants out of me is a book."

"Is that all?"

"That's what I'm asking *you*. Is that the bait for better acquaintance? Or is old Al on the square?"

Staunchly I said, "Alfred Surf, to the best of my knowledge, is a very sincere man."

What the hell else could I say? All men are brothers and only a Cain would mark off a guy who was ready to make a girl willing while he was able. Any book that Surf could get out of Topsy would blunt the needle of his po rnograph. Topsy had had, so far, an exciting life but the intersting portions were decidedly unprintable.

Topsy Twits, an American of Turkish descent, was one of four children, all girls, whose father had died when she was an infant. The mother, a famous nautch-dancer, had reared her girls in the best of hoochy-coochy tradition, and when they were grown all five had shaken down to a sensational act known as The Twitching Twits which had had a gelatinous run for a solid year at the *Lido* in Paris. Thereafter they were in high-priced demand in the best of clubs throughout the continent. When the mother died, The Twitching Twits broke up into individual acts, but a Twits was always twitching as a stellar performer in a top club in some capital of the world. Topsy Twits had been married four times: once to an Argentinian millionaire, once to the Shah de Rebbigate of Istanbul, once to novelist Elvis Priestley, and once to a British pimp of the peerage in Hong Kong who had run up a string of cheap brothels to a laveliere of vast fortune. Hardly the material for an autobiography unless it was planned to be sold under the counter.

"We've had conferences," said Topsy Twits.

"I thought you said so far it's been proper."

"Proper conferences, you naughty bastard. Geez, you have an evil mind, haven't you?"

"Me? Tut-tut," I tutted. "But you *are* a beautiful gal and Surf is a man and a bachelor and normally vulnerable."

"Proper conferences. We've already worked out a title. *Topsy Of The Twitching Twits.* Get it? Topsy, me. The Twitching Twits, the original act that made us famous." She smiled weakly. When Topsy smiles weakly, strong men grow stronger. "I *am* a little worried, if you understand what I mean. Mr. Surf, he's a nice square type, if you know what I mean, but me, I'm a little worried if the stuff that I got to tell sort of fits for like a book. You know?"

"It's food for talk."

"I'm not doing a cook book, sweetie."

"But it sure will simmer, won't it? No. I mean that whether or not you should do this book is a hell of a good subject for a long and serious discussion."

"Okay. So let's discuss."

"Here? Now? You sound as wacky as an author, already."

"Then when?"

"Tonight. Let's make out date tonight at my place. We'll discuss *Topsy Of The Twitching Twits* and we'll decide whether you go ahead with it or whether you chuck the whole idea back into the Surf. Okay?"

"Fine. What time?"

"Any time that suits you."

"Nine o'clock?"

"Swell."

"But remember I'm coming to discuss. Strictly. Discuss."

"Well, naturally. What else?"

The blonde in the blue dress suddenly rose up over yon horizon. Topsy grabbed my wrist and pulled. "Come on, I'll introduce you." Dear devious Topsy. She was either taking revenge by using the needle, or she really was cured of me; whatever, the blonde was a worthy prize; that is, she was worthy, I was the booby, and the prize was making the introduction.

"Frances Elgin meet Peter Chambers."

"Miss Elgin," I said.

"Mr. Chambers," said the blonde.

"Have fun," said Topsy and got lost.

"A beautiful girl," said Miss Elgin.

Miss Elgin was no slob herself. If not for her eyes, Miss Elgin would be ravishing. Tall and haughty, she was built for speed, her blue gown protruding just enough in just the right places. The blonde hair was worn in an upsweep revealing tiny ears from which hung small pendant earrings; the face was oval; the nose short, tilted, and somehow patrician; and there was no makeup, except the glint of magenta upon the lips. She had more class than a colony of colleges, but she flunked out because of the eyes.

There was nothing wrong with the eyes from the point of pulchritude. They were big, blue and beautiful, but they were cold, withdrawn, remote and calculating, with all the shrewd appraisal of a lapidary glued to his loop. She was contained, restrained, and in full control; an interesting gal; a chick whose feathers wouldn't fluster; not a babe whom you could waltz to the hay to the rhythm of a good spiel. If you unbuttoned her, you would first get to the outer shell. A problem, but I was not averse to it. I like a contest, when I'm interested. I was interested. I was more interested in Topsy Twits but the possibility existed that I had already struck out with Topsy Twits. The possibility existed that Topsy Twits

wouldn't even show up for our date at nine. Considering those possibilities, I concentrated on Miss Elgin. An ace in the hole is worth two in the pack.

"Are you here alone?" I said.

"I have an escort . . . somewhere."

It was a monkey wrench, but it didn't destroy the works. I persisted at the screw; that is, persisted in trying to turn it. "A real nice party, isn't it?"

"Too crowded for my taste."

"Are you peeved because you lost your boy-friend?"

"I have no boy-friend."

Score one for me. "Oh," I said, "I thought . . ."

She said nothing. She let me hang like that. Quite a bitch.

I started poking her in a new alley. "Are you an author?" I said.

"No. Are you?" She had a deep voice. She had excellent diction. And she had a hell of an uninterested look on her face.

"Are you bored, Miss Elgin?" I said.

"Yes, somewhat."

"I mean if I'm boring you . . ."

"Oh no no, Mr. Chambers. That wasn't directed at you. I merely meant that this sort of an affair . . ." She shrugged. "Aren't *you* bored?"

"Not while I'm talking to you."

That finally brought a smile. She had fine white shining teeth. "Frankly," she said, "I'd love to leave."

"Frankly," I said, "why don't we?"

She ignored the personal pronoun plural. "My friend, my escort, has some business with Mr. Surf. So, although I'd *love* to leave, I can't until he's ready."

"Oh."

"Did you say you were an author, Mr. Chambers?"

"Actually, I didn't say."

"Actually, I'm not really interested."

Some gals are born temptresses. I was tempted to haul off and bust her right in the mouth. Naturally, I resisted. I had more succulent plans laid for her.

"If you're not interested, Miss Elgin, why do you ask?"

"Just as a matter of conversation, no more. I couldn't possibly be interested in what you do—why should I be? I don't know you. I'll probably never see you again in my life." The cold eyes examined me. "Why is it that men are so unrealistic?"

"Maybe because they're so romantic."

"Are you romantic, Mr. Chambers?"

"Are you interested in *that*, Miss Elgin?"

"Not in the least."

"Then let's try a new subject, Miss Elgin."

"Take your choice, Mr. Chambers."

"How about you? You're not an author . . ."

"I'm a . . . model. I free-lance. I don't work often because I don't like to work. That closes that subject. Now back to you. *Are* you an author?"

"I'm a painter. How would you like to model for me sometime?"

"I'd love to."

That set me back on my round heels. "Well, fine, let's set a date."

"How about—five years from now?"

"You booked that far in advance?"

"I'm going off for a trip to . . . er . . . Australia. I don't expect to be back until then."

"When are you going?"

"Are you being romantic again now, Mr. Chambers? Or unrealistic?"

"Why either?"

"Because what business is it of yours?"

"Miss Elgin, did anybody ever haul off and—"

One of Surf's butlers saved the day, or lost it. He slithered by bearing a high tray of drinks and in desperation I reached up and took pot-luck and came down with two martinis and bowed to my lady and offered one to her, olive jiggling mischievously.

"No thanks," she said.

"Don't you drink?"

"I do, but I don't particularly care for martinis."

"Neither do I, but as you saw, I had little choice."

"Yes, I saw, you didn't," she commiserated politely but her white little paws remained firmly at her sides. Some bastard, no?

So there I stood, two-fisted me, both fists filled with martinis slightly slopping over. It was enough to drive you to drink. It was also damned embarrassing.

"Don't you want yours either?" she said, sadistically courteous.

"Which one would you say was mine?"

"Take your choice."

She wasn't going to help and I was no juggler. You can't drink a martini with one hand while balancing a martini with the other, not unless you're putting on a performance for a beautiful cold-eyed sadistic bastard, and that wasn't the kind of performance I intended to put on for her. "Excuse me," I said.

"You're not forsaking me, Mr. Chambers?"

"Never. I'm just going to change up our drinks. What's your pleasure, Miss Elgin?"

"Drambuie, if you can find some."

"Oh, I'm sure I'll find some." Yeah. If a dram of Drambuie would have turned those cold eyes hot, I would still have come back empty-handed. Two can play at the same game and my game was not lackey for the likes of Elgin.

It was tough threading through the throng of book-lovers balancing two martinis and some of the leaves of grass got sprinkled before I arrived at a table at the edge of the room and it was tough, even unbalanced, shoving through to get back to her, but she was no longer alone. She was flanked by two sprites in tight pants, beatnik beards, and marcelled hair, one of whom was saying: ". . . and Mr. Surf has published three slender books of my poetry but personally I simply can't stand him myself. He's such a *bore,* you know, *such* a bore. My friend here calls him the cliche-ridden monster. I wish he would do an autobiography one day because I have the perfect title, just the perfect title. *The Cornball Cannonball.* Good, hey? Precise? He's a cube with drive . . ."

And then there he was, Alfred Surf, waving at me.

I fought my way to him. "Hi," I said.

"Where've you been?"

"Looking for you. Talking, in the meantime, to a dame named Twits."

"Gorgeous, huh?" Blue eyes twinkled behind the glasses. "If you'll be a good boy maybe some day I'll get you a fix there."

"Have *you* gotten a fix there yet?"

"Not yet, but I'm working on it."

"Yeah, she told me she's writing a book."

He grinned. "What else do I have to offer? My youth? My beauty? Money she's got."

"Ah, the Cornball Cannonball. There's nothing cornball about you, pal. You just like to give that impression."

"Part of my defense. Cornball Cannonball. Hey, that's good."

"It's not mine. It's one of your authors—describing you."

"Probably one of my poets, in appreciation of my losing money on him."

"He was talking about you to a Miss Elgin."

"Yeah, yeah, she's the girl-friend of—"

From somewhere I thought I heard a voice: *Call for Peter Chambers.*

Surf didn't hear. "Come on," he said. "I've got Barry Howard stashed alone in a little room upstairs."

Now the butler's voice came clear and loud and near. "Call for Peter Chambers."

Surf said, "What now?"

"A friend of mine. I told him to call. Jack Medford."

Surf waved to the butler and pointed at me. The butler stopped his noise.

"Here, take it over here." Surf led me to a phone and stayed with me. "I'm not letting you out of my sight. Tell this Jack Medford, if he wants you he can come here. He's invited."

But it wasn't Jack Medford.

It was Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker.

TWELVE

"HELLO JACK," I said to the phone.

"This is Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, Homicide," said Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, Homicide, but primly. "Who's this? I want to speak to Peter—"

"Louie?"

"Pete?"

"How'd you know to call me here, Louie?"

"Jack Medford told me."

"Jack Medford? What's with you and Jack Medford?"

"What do you think? Trouble."

"What the hell kind of trouble can he have with *you*?"

"What kind of trouble do you think?

"No!" I said.

"Look, Pete, it may be bad, it may not be bad—we don't know. This blasted kid won't talk."

"I know."

"You *know*?"

"He's like sick that way. Had trouble as a youngster with the wrong kind of cop and he's been frightened to death ever since."

"You're a friend of his?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Well, he brought up your name. Said he'd talk—but only to you. He told us where to call you. If you are a friend of his, Pete, then you'd better get down here right away. But right away!"

"Where?"

"Penelope Arlington's place. You coming?"

"Sure."

"Well, step on it." He hung up.

Surf broke out of a circle of conversation and took my arm. "All right, come on," he said. "I'm dying for you two to get together."

Absently I said, "What? Who?"

He drew up short, squinted at me. "What the hell's the matter with *you*?"

"I've got to go."

"Go? *Go?* I've got the guy stashed upstairs, waiting."

"What time is it?"

Surf looked. "Ten to six."

"I'll be back within an hour. Time enough?"

"Yes. But what the hell's so confounded important?"

"I don't know."

That popped his eyeballs right smack against his glasses.

And I left him like that—perplexed, disgruntled, and eyeball-glass-smacked.

Penelope Arlington owned a house at 14 Sutton Place, one of the few old, quaint, distinctive houses as yet undemolished in the City of New York. Folded within my cab going down to Sutton Place, I lay chin on knees perilously and dwelt upon Penelope Arlington before going on to Jack Medford. Penelope Arlington had more multiplying millions that she could count, and she had been born to them. Penelope was the last of the Arlingtons, one of the oldest and richest of America's first families risen to enormous estate in the good old American way—from slave-traders to robber-barons to stock market manipulators, and thence to holier-than-thou interlocking corporate directors, righteous tax-loopholers, secret spendthrifts, and dedicated philanthropists. Penelope was the last of the Arlingtons because she had never married—why keep a husband around the house when you have all the money and all the men you can use? Penelope was now a soft-skinned svelte blonde, fiftyish, but as well-preserved as a butterfly under glass. Penelope was an eccentric, and proud of it. Also she could afford it. A handsome woman and a passionate gadabout, she was strongly addicted to jazz, food, laughter, parties, plays, horses, and the four strata of society, high, low, cafe, and underworld. She was also firmly addicted to men—preferably young, attractive, and virile. She turned up at the various night spots with all sorts of odd-balls: gangsters, potentates, gamblers, painters, Yale-boys, and Alcatraz graduates—but always young, attractive, virile. Years ago she had slept with Charlie Medford, at present she was sleeping with Charlie's son; a bank president, Donald P. K. Sloan, had spoken of her as a close and personal friend, yet she was acquainted with a cheap little hood like Mike the Pea—there you have examples of the span and scan of the ebullient Arlington. She was a regular item in all of the gossip columns, she had enough color for a museum of Van Gogh paintings, and she was a prime and overdue prospect for involvement in violence.

The violence was murder else it wouldn't have been Parker on the telephone because Parker was Homicide. Whom had she killed and why and what did young Jack have to do with it? She had a notorious temper, an unpredictable temperament, and a respect for nothing and no one. On the other hand, Jack—

"Fourteen Sutton," said my driver.

"Yes sir," I said.

There was a cop stationed outside the lacquered ebony door of 14 Sutton Place. He was tall and broad and he seemed to grow taller and broader as, after paying off my cab, I approached.

"Yeah?" he said when we were vis-a-vis.

"I'm to see Lieutenant Parker."

"What name?"

"Peter Chambers."

He opened the door and I passed through into a cool lobby in which a granite-faced cop sat in a marble chair reading a newspaper. He looked up at me and looked back to the paper. Do you know the type? An important man with a shiny badge concentrating on important business while the visiting dignitary cools his heels while toeing the mark in the outer office. The newspaper, of course, was open to the comic page.

Cool of heel but hot under the collar, the visiting dignitary suffered inner turmoil in the outer office but, admirably, kept a lid on his boiling patience. Finally the dignitary coughed, but dignified.

"Sick?" said the cop without looking up.

"Sick and tired."

So he looked up. "What's with the big mouth?" he said.

"With the big mouth it's like this. A taxpayer doesn't pay taxes so that a funny-looking cop should sit around on his fat ass reading the funnies and paying attention to nothing else. That's how it is with *this* big mouth and what are you going to do about it?"

"Oh, one of *them* guys, huh?" He folded the paper, laid it on the floor, and stood up. "You one of them wise-guy reporters? Is that it?"

"No."

"All right. So talk it up. You got a big enough trap. So what the hell do you want here?"

"I want here the hell Lieutenant Parker. He's for real, not in the funny paper, and I'm here at his specific request. My name is Peter Chambers and the lieutenant is waiting for me. Does any of that meet with your approval, Commissioner?"

The granite face grew red but it cracked to a stony smile. "Why didn't you say so in the first place, Mr. Chambers?"

"Nobody asked me in the first place."

"You're to go in there." He pointed to a paneled door. "The drawing room."

"Thank you."

The first person to draw my eyes in the drawing room was Michael Peabody.

Mike the Pea in person.

THIRTEEN

IT WAS not a pretty picture that was framed within that drawing room, sort of a still life—of crime. Standing, motionless, were two uniformed policemen. Seated, motionless, were Mike the Pea and one Sandy Santee, a crooked lawyer with more curves than a road around a mountain. Sandy Santee was a fat man with a pink bald pate surrounded by an aureole-like frizz of white hair. He had a pink face, porcine eyes, a thick nose, and a thin-lipped mouth. He was a well-known criminal lawyer, the adjective applying to him as well as to his clientele. He had been twice disbarred and twice reinstated because he was a power amongst the local politicians. He was a lower-echelon lawyer for lower-echelon criminals, a fixer, a ward-heeler, a sharpshooter, an angle-guy, but keen as the edge of a switchblade knife and a knowledgeable and troublesome (and grudgingly respected) roadblock in the path of the activities of police and prosecutor.

Sandy Santee gave me a dose of his dun-colored eyes and said nothing.

Mike the Pea, resplendent in silver-grey mohair, said. "Well, look what we got here. Now it's a *real* slumming party."

"Shut up," said Santee.

"Can't I even talk to the shamus?"

"You talk when I tell you to talk, period."

"That's right," I said. "You just be a nice quiet little punk and listen to teacher."

"There's only *one* punk in this room and that's—'

"Shut up," said Santee.

"You tell him, teacher," I said.

"What are you doing here anyway?" said Santee.

"The lieutenant has requested my questionable services," I said.

"Questionable is a hundred percent correct," said Mike the Pea. "And if there's one punk that I'd like to—"

"Shut up," said Santee.

One of the cops said, "You're Peter Chambers?"

"I am," I said.

"You know what a chamber is?" said Mike the Pea. "Like a bed-chamber? It's a pot that you piss in."

"That's a chamber *pot,*" said Santee, grinning with bad teeth.

"Well, that's what *he* is," said Mike the Pea. "A chamber *pot.*"

"Now why don't you shut up?" said Santee but still grinning.

"Okay, okay," said the cop. "*Both* of you shut up." To me he said politely and pleasantly, "Will you come this way, please?" There *are* polite and pleasant cops, I am happy to report.

"I don't envy you having to listen to this bright chatter," I said.

"I don't listen," he said. "This way, please."

He opened a door, led me through a corridor, opened another door, and I passed into a vast book-lined library where, at a long shiny table, were seated Jack Medford, Detective-Lieutenant Louis Parker, and a glowing redhead with green eyes who, even seated, was putting her breast a foot forward. A young uniformed policeman stood as sentinel but his eyes were riveted upon that redhead as though she bore a chest of gold. You couldn't blame him. That gal was certainly eye-catching. She jutted like a peninsula and the dress she was wearing, green too, was bursting with such expansive cleavage as to prevent a young cop from giving a tittle of attention anywhere else. When I entered all eyes, except of course the policeman's turned to me.

Jack Medford said quietly, "Hello, Mr. Chambers."

Parker shoved out of his chair. "I'd like a word with you first, Pete."

"Sure," I said.

We quit the library and I followed him along a hallway and then he touched the knob of a door and he said, "Keep a close hold on yourself, kid, This isn't going to be pretty."

"Just a minute," I said.

"What?"

"You know who that boy is, don't you?"

"Jack Medford, and that's all I know because that's all he's told me."

I sank a probe. "He's the son of Charles Medford, the guy who walked out of that bank with the hundred gees."

"I don't care whose son he is. As I've told you once before, I don't deal in larceny. My business is murder."

So he didn't know and I couldn't tell him. Charlie Medford was Generoso's case. It was only a couple of hours old. It hadn't spread out yet to all the other hunters out in the field nosing for the spoors of the murderers who were their assignments. He didn't know and I wasn't *supposed* to know—so how could I tell him?

In one sense—the cowardly sense—it was a relief. I couldn't tell him—I wasn't supposed to know—so I couldn't tell it to Jack Medford either. Who among you relishes—wouldn't prefer to avoid?—the mission of informing a son of his father's murder?

Parker turned the knob and we were in a spacious bedroom, one lonely uniformed cop moodily staring out of a window. The bed was occupied but the limp folds of a blanket completely covered its occupant. I repressed a shudder. Hell, I'm in the business and I've seen many blankets and many sheets covering a corpse but there is no one in the world, including me, who becomes accustomed to looking upon death. Parker glanced at me, pulled his lips together, strode quickly to the bed, and pulled the blanket.

The corpse was Penelope Arlington.

FOURTEEN

IT WAS bad. Parker deemed it necessary—possibly to enlist my total cooperation—that I view the body, but even as I looked, I could see that he wasn't, that he was looking past her rather than at her. Her throat was cut so wide open her head was askew, almost decapitated, hinged to her body by the bones at the back of her neck. The pillow, the sheets, and her yellow silk nightgown were soaked in blood.

"All right," I said and swallowed hard.

Parker covered her with the blanket. I moved to the cop at the open window and breathed deeply. Parker, humanely, waited until I was back in control.

"We can't move her, we can't touch a thing," Parker said. "None of my technical-boys have arrived yet, nor anybody from the Medical Examiners office. We're marking time."

"And you think my boy did this?"

"He's one of our suspects."

"You're nuts."

"Why?"

"Louie, I've known Jack Medford since he was a boy, a little kid. He couldn't."

"You don't think he's capable of murder? Is that it? Pete, you've been in the business long enough—"

"I don't think he's capable of *this* kind of murder, this kind of close-on, intimate, shocking murder. A bullet from a gun, somehow it's impersonal. But this . . ." I shook my head. "I won't buy it. This kid, inside, is too finely-meshed, too sensitive . . ."

"Maybe." Parker shrugged. "But he hasn't denied . . ."

"Has he admitted?"

"He's clammed, period. He's given us his name, he's told us he wanted you, and he's told us where we could reach you. Period."

"What about the weapon?"

"We have it. And where do you think we found it?"

"Where?"

"In the right hand of the finely-meshed sensitive Jack Medford."

"May I see it?"

"Come here." I went with him to an ornate dresser where he pointed to an open, bloody, six-inch switchblade. "Don't touch," he said. "Till my technicians get here, we don't touch a thing. Look but don't touch."

It was an ash-wood, oyster-white, intricately-carved dresser. It had two, parallel, half-size upper drawers, and, beneath them, a tier of three full-size lower drawers. The right-hand upper drawer was pulled halfway open. The knife lay on top of the dresser between two tall pink vases. The vase on the left contained orchids. The vase on the right contained gardenias. The flowers were wilted and tired.

"Look," I said, "if I'm to talk to Medford, I think you'd better tell me what this is all about, what that Mike Peabody is doing here, and that shyster Santee."

"Fair enough. You want it from the horse's mouth?"

"Who's the horse?"

"Denise Monet."

"Who's Denise Monet?"

"The readhead outside."

"Who's the redhead outside?"

"Penelope Arlington's personal maid."

"Is she a suspect too?"

"Not at all. Clean."

"Fine," I said. "From that horse's mouth I want it, and how."

"Just take care, lover-boy. She's French and excitable."

"So?"

"She's a married woman."

"So?"

"She's married to a professional wrestler."

"Oh."

Parker motioned to the cop. "Would you bring Mrs. Monet in here, please?"

"Yessir." The cop went out and returned with the redhead, her hips swinging like ropes off a gibbet, but her face pale and strained as is seemly in the presence of death. She was a big one: tall, top-heavy, muscular, and massively curved, but all in exquisite proportion. If her husband was a wrestler, he probably put in his best practice licks at home.

She looked once at the bunched figure beneath the blanket and did not look again.

"Mrs. Monet," said Parker. "This is Peter Chambers."

"How do you do?" I said.

She nodded.

"Mrs. Monet, if you please," said Parker. "Would you begin at the beginning once again for Mr. Chambers?"

She sighed. Her tongue flicked out moistening her lips. "Madame and me, we have been in ze countree for a week. We have return at about four o'clock. Madame, she is very fatigue, and she goes to ze bed for a nahp. Eet is about ten minutes to fife when I wake her opp. I know she has ze appointmahnt for fife, so I wake her."

"Appointment for five?" I said. "I happen to know that her appointment with Jack Medford was for five-thirty."

"Ah yes oui, is true. I speak of ze ozzer appointmahnt. Zat one eet is for fife."

"Which one?"

"Wiz Monsieur Peabody."

"Oh."

"Okay," said Parker. "So you woke her up."

"Madame, she has brought a presahnt — a riding-wheep — for her friend Madame Celia Krause who has ze domicile on Central Park West. So Madame, when I wake her, she say to me, 'Uhkay, Denise, you weel now go to bring ze presahnt to Madame Krause. And I say, 'But Madame, you are alone in ze bed and you weel have ze guest shortly.' And Madame, she say, 'So my guest, *he* weel wake me opp, or he weel get in ze bed wiz me. So now go, Denise, and leave unlocked ze front door.' And Madame, she smile and yawn and go back to sleep."

Parker took it up. "Denise pushes the snap on the outside door leaving it unlocked and blows as ordered. She comes back at about twenty after five and she finds your Jack Medford standing here in the bedroom. That knife is in his hand and Penelope Arlington is—dead in bed."

"So queekly I call ze police," said Denise, "and queekly ze police comes . . . "

"And what does Jack Medford do in the meantime?"

"He stands like how you say eet—petrified."

"And he does about that much talking," said Parker, "as though he's petrified which means, I think, turned to stone. He wants Peter Chambers, period."

"He's frightened of cops, Louie. He had a bad experience as a youngster."

"He's liable to have a worse experience as a grown-up."

"What about that first appointment — the five o'clock shadow —that Michael Peabody?"

"The minute Mrs. Monet gives us that part of her story — one of my boys goes out and picks him up."

"Where?"

"Where he lives, *Hotel Brittany*. He'd hardly just got there. Still had his hat on. My guy hauls him out but just as they're leaving, Sandy Santee shows up. Sandy accompanied him back here. I'm a stickler for law and order, as you damned well know. A guy's entitled to legal counsel. Peabody insisted that his lawyer be present during his questioning and I couldn't legally, object."

"I might as well get his story too, huh, before I tackle Medford? The kid might be tough with me too. Better to shore up all the ammunition I can."

"No reason why not, Pete. I've asked for your cooperation — I can't deny you mine. I'll get Peabody." Parker bowed to Denise, bowed to me, and marched out. Something ludicrously Continental always happens to American men, including me, under the subtle influence of an Old World accent especially when it emanates from a female.

So now I bowed and marched—but away from the incandescent Denise. I arrived at the dresser and tried to avoid the bloody knife by concentrating on the vases of flowers. "What's with flowers?" I said. "What's with such tired orchids and gardenias?"

"Madame," said Denise, "hates flowers—nevaire has zem."

"She hates flowers? So she has flowers on her dresser?"

"A beau of Madame, he bring zem last week. He places zem in ze vases."

"All wilted like that?"

"Oh no, zen zey were fresh. But zat was last week and we have been away all of *zis* week. . . ."

Parker came back with Peabody and Santee. Peabody was carrying his gay Tyrolean hat. Santee was carrying a sour expression. Parker bowed to Denise, said, "Thank you very much, Mrs. Monet." He looked toward the cop and the cop, quite happily, took the redhead's ample arm and escorted her out. "All right, Peabody," said Parker, "tell Mr. Chambers what happened here today."

"Why the hell should I tell *him* anything? Who the hell is he?"

"Michael," said Santee, "don't be obdurate. If the lieutenant wishes you to repeat your story, he is within his rights. The lieutenant has been eminently fair and aboveboard with us. It is only fitting that we be fair and aboveboard with him."

"Yeah," I said. "Fair and aboveboard. You two are just the team for that."

"See what I mean?" said Mike the Pea.

"Tell your story, Mr. Peabody," said Parker.

The Pea looked at his prompter and the prompter nodded his pink head. "Well," said the Pea, "I got this date with her for five bells, and at five bells I come. I ring. There's no answer. I I try the door. It's open. So I'm in and I find her sleeping in bed. I wake her but she's in the mood for company. Well, I'm no crumb like certain people I know. If a dame don't want company, she don't want company. We shmooz around a little and then I tell her I'd better toddle along, huh? She says okay but that I should come back in the evening, she's going to make a party. I tell her I'll lock that outside door for her. She says no I shouldn't because she's expecting that goof, that sculptor-joe, that Medford. I say how come she makes a date with both of us when she's so tired and sleepy. She says she didn't expect to be tired and sleepy and thought she'd enjoy the company of two nice young men. Yeah, two nice young men. Anyway, there's going to be a part later which is like consolation. So I blow and leave that doorsnap unlocked just like she says."

"How long did you stay?" I said.

"How the hell do I know? I didn't clock myself. Maybe ten, fifteen minutes."

"And then?"

"I go back to my hotel. It takes a little time, getting a cab, all of that. Well, I'm not there maybe a minute when wham!—banging on the door. A cop. He don't have to take no cab, he don't have to stop for no lights, he goes with the siren wide open. I'm home maybe a minute when wham! — there's the cop rapping on my door. I open up, he starts lugging me out, and lucky, Mr. Santee comes along to call on me. Mr. Santee comes back here with me to protect my interests, and like that nobody pushes me around, everybody's nice and polite."

"Did you happen to bring a knife with you, Mike?"

"I object," said Sandy Santee.

Innocently I said, "But I asked nice and polite."

"He doesn't have to answer any question that might incriminate him."

"I'll be happy to answer the louse, Mr. Santee," said Mike.

"Well, answer," I said.

"At least you know who's the louse, don't you?"

"I object," I said.

"No," he said.

"No, what?"

"No, I didn't happen to bring a knife, Mr. Peeper." He set his hat rakishly over his golden hair and opened his baby-blue eyes at me. "Any more questions?"

"No," I said nice and polite.

"We've got a date," he said. "Remember?"

"You and I . . . ?"

"Once," he said. "When you don't have me over a barrel. You're supposed to prove you're a man."

"Oh yes," I said.

"Whats *this* all about?" said Parker.

"He's a handsome kid with big muscles and a fat head. He's challenged me to knock it off. He can't believe that mashing him up is the kind of small potatoes I don't have time for."

"Don't have time for." He sneered. "You're a dog, a yellow dog —"

"Easy, kid," said Santee.

"Any time I catch up with him, the bastard has got me over a barrel."

"We'll work it out," I said.

Sharply Parker said, "Is there anything else, Pete?"

"Nothing else."

"Then come along with us, won't you?"

He delivered Mike and Sante to the cops in the drawing room, he sent back the bedroom-cop to the bedroom, he got rid of Denise, and then he and I and Medford and one cop were in the library. Parker, always the good psychologist, drew the cop aside to one corner of the room and quietly chatted with him, giving me the opportunity to sit down alone with Medford.

"Easy does it, pal," I said. "You wanted me. I'm here."

He was pale, he looked scared, there were black circles beneath his eyes, but his first question was about his father. "Has there been any word . . . anything . . . about Dad?"

Hell, I had to set him up for it. "Nothing. And the more time that goes by like that, the less I like it."

"Meaning?"

"Look, we're pretty well agreed that Charlie's no crook. But he *did* walk out of that bank with the money. It shapes up as some kind of a swindle; that, somehow, he got hooked into a deal. Well, by now he'd have been heard from, unless . . . unless . . ."

"Unless something's happened to him."

"That's the only way I can figure it."

He put a hand to his forehead and squeezed fingers at his temples. "I . . . I've finally come around to that too. It's been bugging the hell out of me. That's why I came here early, earlier than my actual appointment. I was anxious to talk to Penelope. And then I found her . . . found her like that . . . " The hand came away from the forehead and both hands squeezed together until the blood was out of the knuckles.

"You didn't have anything to do with that, did you?"

"No no of course not."

"Then you tell your story to Lieutenant Parker. He a nice guy, fair and square. I've known him for as long as I've know your father. He's a right guy."

"I . . . I'm scared, Mr. Chambers."

"Sure you are, kid. But I'm right here alongside of you and Parker's a good man, really a good man. Now you're going to have to talk to him, boy . . . "

I waved to Parker. Parker came quickly and sat down with us. I let the kid ease up while I made some preliminary conversation with Parker. "Aren't you going to have his statement taken down?" I said.

"I don't have a stenographer here yet. Cops aren't as efficient as they're cracked up to be." Good old Parker. Wise old Parker. Just the right tone of voice. Just sufficient deprecation. None of the big-badge stuff. No pressure. Quiet and easy.

"You mean they'll have to repeat their stories? Mike Peabody too?"

"Of course. We'll do the questions and answers all over again but the second time they'll swear to their statements." Parker chuckled properly. "The first time it's sort of a rehearsal."

"Jack," I said, "I don't know whether you've been formally introduced to the lieutenant. Anyway, Lieutenant Parker—Jack Medford."

Jack smiled sickly.

Parker smiled engagingly.

"Louie"—I purposely used his first name—"you ask the questions. Jack'll answer, I'm certain, to the best of his ability."

"Thanks," said Parker politely but couldn't restrain a deep sigh, thus admitting his own nervousness. "Just for openers I'd like to ask a question *about* questions." Another sigh. "Mr. Medford, I'd like to know why you've refused to answer any of my questions until now."

"May I answer that?" I said.

"Sure," said Parker. Wise old Parker. He was going along with me, giving the kid a chance to simmer down.

"Once, long ago," I said, "Jack here was arrested in a murder deal that was thought to be a gang-job. He was kept overnight, he was brutally treated by some of the storm-troopers that masquerade as law-abiding policemen. He's been scared of cops—and the ways and means and manners of cops—ever since. Now, once again it seems, he's caught by the crotch in a murder deal, another murder deal. Can you blame him for falling back on the one defense he's learned — silence?"

"No," said wise old Parker. "I can't blame him. Once burnt, always wary."

"He has confidence in me—I've known him since he was a little boy—and he knows I'm in the racket and, just as that Peabody of yours depends upon his Santee, so Jack depends upon me. But I'm sure he'll answer any of your questions now, Lieutenant. Won't you, Jack?"

"Yes."

"All right then," said Parker. "How long have you known Miss Arlington?"

"Since I was a youngster, a kid. She was a friend of my father."

"And now that you're grown up—she's a friend of yours?"

"Yes sir. That's right."

"A good friend? She was a good friend of yours?"

"Yes sir."

"How good?"

Jack looked at me. I nodded. "A *very* good friend, sir. I'm an an artist, sir, a sculptor. She assisted me, as sort of a patron. She advanced money to me, encouraged me, recommended clients to me."

"I see," said Parker. "So you were *very* good friends."

I said, "Bosom companions. If you expect any of the intimate details, Jack is too much of a gentleman to divulge them." That told Parker what he wanted to know, and wise old Parker went on from there.

"All right then. What happened here today?"

"I had an appointment with her for five-thirty."

"What time did you come?"

"At about five-fifteen or so."

"Any reason that you came early?"

I said, "I'll answer that, if you please, Lieutenant."

For the first time annoyance marred the lieutenant's resolutely

benign expression and he almost choked over the purr of; "But of course, Mr. Chambers."

"Jack's father, Charles R. Medford, is in some sort of trouble with bank where he's employed—I believe you know some of that, Lieutenant."

"Yes. So?"

"Jack and I learned that of recent months, Medford senior, a widower, had been going with a girl whom, he had met at one of Miss Arlington's parties. We felt that perhaps this girl might have something to do with Charles Medford's difficulties. Jack was anxious to talk with Miss Arlington about this and that's why he came early."

"Thank you," said Parker unable to control a small bite at the bottom of his voice, "and I'd also thank you, Mr. Chambers, if you'll kindly permit Mr. Medford here to answer his own questions; I mean, my questions; I mean, his own answers to my questions, not yours; I mean, *my* questions, but *his* answers, not yours."

"But of course, Lieutenant."

"All right then, Mr. Medford," said Parker. "You came here at five-fifteen."

"Approximately five-fifteen."

"Yes, Mr. Medford. Approximately five-fifteen. What happened?"

The boy chewed at his lips, wetting them. "I rang the bell. There was no answer. I tried the door. It was open. I entered, walked through, calling Miss Arlington's name. There was no answer. I thought this very strange, continued walking through, from room to room, calling her name. Finally, I came to the bedroom. That door was open, wide open, and I saw her there on the bed"—he clenched and unclenched his hands as though squeezing invisible sponges — "just as you've seen her. I went in, she was dead, I was tempted to run, I was scared blue. Then I saw that knife on the floor. Like a fool, like an idiot, I picked it up, and I was holding it, looking at it, when the maid came in."

"Now hold it a moment, Mr. Medford."

"Yes, sir?"

"You were scared blue, that I understand. You were tempted to run, that I don't understand."

"Sir, er, Lieutenant, as Mr. Chambers informed you, I was once involved in a murder thing, and I was frightened, frightened to death over it, frightened to death that, innocently, I could be accused and involved and made to seem as though I had done it. Now here she was, Penelope, dead in bed, and I was there alone

with her, and I was scared and I wanted to run because I didn't want to be involved, because I know how dreadful it can be when the skillful questions are asked and your answers tie you deeper and deeper into something you didn't do."

"But you picked up the knife?"

"It was there on the floor."

"But you picked it up?"

"It was an involuntary action, like a reflex action. I wish to God I didn't."

"And you were holding it when the maid—Mrs. Monet—came in?"

"Yes sir."

"And what did you do then?"

"Nothing. I just stood there, shaking like a leaf, scared out of my wits. I saw her go to the phone. I heard her call the police. What could I do then? Run? It was too late for that. I just stood there. I did nothing. What *could* I have done?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Quiet," said Parker.

"Sorry," I said.

"Is there anything you'd like to add, Mr. Medford?" said Parker.

"That's all there is, sir."

"Did you kill her, Mr. Medford?"

"Are you crazy, sir?"

"Categorically, did you kill her, Mr. Medford?"

"Categorically, I did not, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Medford. And thank you, Mr. Chambers."

I stood up. "Jack," I said, "I've got to go back to Alfred Surf's on business. I mean there's nothing else I can do here at this moment. Is it all right with you if I leave now?"

His hands kept squeezing the invisible sponges. "Whatever you think right, Mr. Chambers."

"I won't be long. I'll be back." I turned to Parker. "Is it all right if I come back here?"

"Love to have you, Peter. We haven't even begun here, as a matter of fact. I'm certain there are going to be many more questions and it seems that Mr. Medford is more comfortable when you're present. Yes. Do come back. By all means." He chuckled. It almost choked him. Wise old Parker. He was still softening up Jack Medford. "Perhaps you and Mike Peabody will square off for a couple of rounds upstairs in Miss Arlington's gymnasium. Four rounds for a couple of preliminary boys. I'll referee. By the way, Mr. Medford, are you acquainted with Michael Peabody?"

"Slightly," said Medford.

"I'll run now," I said.

"Goodbye, Mr. Chambers," said Medford.

"See you later," said Parker.

Going out, I was almost trampled by Parker's technicians, coming in.

FIFTEEN

SURF'S PARTY had not thinned a whit. On the contrary, the motley lot had thickened and thickened a lot. Dusk had released the last of the office workers and those who had known had flown for the free food, the convivial cocktails, the brimming conversation, and the possible pickup for a later shackup when the dusk grew duskier and the lust grew lustier. The literature-lovers were milling like cattle, filling like swine, and swilling like literature-lovers. The place stank of perfume, perspiration, peasant and poet, the ventilation had gone bad, and the clatter of the chatter was shattering.

I sought Topsy but Topsy was not topside. The Twits had either called it quits or was well-hidden in the jam-pack of the wolf-pack. I sought Surf but Surf was somewhere at ebb. I sought the blonde in the blue gown and I found her. She was the quarry of a quartet of slim-trousered drunks each one trying to make time with the Elgin. I broke through their rank ranks and although she graced my advance with a glacial glance she said, "Hi," took my arm, and we forsook the quartet for new quarters at the side of the room where she let loose of my arm as though it pained her. "Thanks," she said.

"For what?" I said.

"For the rescue."

"I rescued you?"

"And I've thanked you. Don't make a Federal case."

"I mean I don't know what I rescued you *from*."

"From those awful men."

"They seemed quite nice," I said. "A little lushed perhaps but quite nice. I'd imagine you'd be flattered."

Her nostrils grew scornful. "By what?"

"By the attentions of nice men."

"Mr. . . . er . . . I'm not flattered by the attentions of men."

"Chambers."

"Mr. . . . er . . . I'm not flattered by the attentions of men."

"What *are* you flattered by, Miss Elgin?"

"Oh, you remembered my name."

"Frances Elgin. Does that flatter you?"
"Not in the least."
"What the hell does flatter you, Miss Elgin?"
"Please watch your language."
"Yes ma'am. What flatters you, Miss Elgin?"
"Very little, Mr. Er. Least of all the attentions of men."
"Maybe the attentions of women?"
"Has anyone ever told you were a boor, Mr. Er?"
"Chambers."
"In chambers you were told you were a boor?"
"No no, my name."
"Your name? What has your name to do with this?"
"Honey, let's start fresh again."
"Please don't call me honey."
"Yes ma'am. May we start fresh again?"
"Again? You've been fresh all the way."
"Sweetie . . . "
"Don't call me sweetie."

I hauled off with a deep sigh. I would rather have hauled off with a shallow clout. There are children, the psychologists tell us, who have a need for punishment. There are adults, I should like to tell the psychologists, who have a greater need for punishment. Miss Elgin had a private need for corporal punishment as general therapy. Miss Elgin could use a slam at the ham or a pork at the chops or a stew at the kidneys or a whack at the whiskers or an overall shaking, thoroughly administered, to shake her loose from her supercilious posture. Miss Elgin was as spoiled as old meat unrefrigerated. Miss Elgin had flipped her lid under the lip of too many hot guys. Miss Elgin needed a good jolt and I would have loved to have been the piston that shot it at her. Instead, simple male ever mindful of the possibility of conquest, I simpered, "Miss Elgin, here we are at a big cocktail party making with the little talk. Why do you insist upon being difficult? You? You're a beautiful gal. Me? I'm a humble male trying his darndest to be nice and hoping in the end to date you. Is that wrong?"

The cold eyes laid their ice on me. "Do you see what I mean about the flattery, Mr. Er?"

"No."

"As you have so poetically put it—I'm a beautiful gal. It so happens, I agree with you."

"No false modesty about *you,* Miss Elgin."

"Why do you insist upon interrupting, Mr. Er?"

"Chambers."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"As I was saying, Mr. Er, I agree with you. Now, in the animal world, the males flock to the females who are in heat. In our world, the males flock to the females who are, as you put it, beautiful gals. What, then, is flattering about it? Why should I be flattered because the male of the species constantly crowds about me as though I were a female animal in heat?"

What in all hell do you say to that? Aside from beauty, she had logic on her side. I said, "But aren't you ever in heat, Miss Elgin?"

"Now please don't be vulgar, Mr. Er?"

"No no, I don't mean to be. Somehow, with you, the words come out wrong. What I meant—aren't you, as a female, ever attracted to a man, as a male? I mean there are sometimes vibrations, mutual chemical reactions." Her reaction was no reaction. I continued lamely, but trying to be sprightly, lightly: "I thought that something like that, you know *something*, occurred between us. Now I've been away for some time. Will you admit that, well, in some way, without actually realizing it, without actually putting your finger on it, somehow—you missed me?"

What did I have to lose?

She straightened, seeming to grow taller. The blue eyes narrowed to frigid slits. Slowly she said, "You were . . . away?"

Sometimes by subtle (subtle?) suggestion you can talk things into them. Miss Frances Elgin, it appeared, was impervious to any of my subtle suggestions. I switched, fast. "Miss Elgin," I said, "come off it, huh? I admit I'm a guy on the make. Can't you thaw, just a little, even if it's only because I happened along and rescued you?"

"You know what I'm thinking, Mr. Er?"

"What?" I said brightening invisibly.

"I'm thinking it would be just lovely if right now someone *else* happened along to rescue me from *you*."

Suddenly I had had it. Suddenly the bulwark of interior defense rose up as a rampart to protect me from me. Suddenly I was so much in love with Topsy Twits it was traitorous of me to trade my blandishments for a barrage of insults. Suddenly I knew that Topsy Twits would not disappoint me, that she would be at my apartment promptly at nine. I was in love! By what riddle of putrid pusillanimity was I hanging on as a tattered target to be riddled by the second-rate blasts of this second-best bitch? I girded for guarded retreat when she finally hoisted the haymaker.

"You know," she said, "in a way you're worse than all of the

rest. You're the humble-type boor, the beggar. You come on strong with the weak pitch, if you know what I mean. Some men disgust me. Others make me ill. You make me ill. Go away, won't you?"

My right hand dangling at my right side was doing a trick on me behind my back. It was curling into a knotty burl for a hurling. I shifted stance to haul off and throw a punch, not too hard, just enough to cause a riot. So far this had been a talking party: it was time for action: somebody would start it, why not I? But once more my lady of this evening received buttress from a butler.

It was the same guy who had paged me earlier. He slid between me and the object of my disaffection and he beamed upon me with an evident pleasure that flattened my hackles and warmed my cockles.

"You *are* Mr. Chambers, aren't you, sir?" he said.

"I am."

"I thought I recognized you, sir. I'm the one who called you to the telephone before. Do you remember, sir? Mr. Surf instructed me to watch out for you, sir. I'm Manville, sir."

"Yes, Manville?"

"Excuse me," said Manville to Miss Elgin.

"Any excuse is better than none," said the Elgin ticking off to where other sweeping hands clocked her presence in timex-honored embrace.

"I'm Manville," said Manville.

"Much married but seemingly unharried."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"I'm Chambers," I said.

"I thought I recognized you, sir."

"You said that before."

"I'm Manville."

"You also said that before."

"I'm Mr. Surf's butler, sir. I mean I'm Mr. Surf's permanent butler, sir. The other butlers, sir, are impermanent butlers, sir, temporary butlers for the party, sir."

"I'm permanent Chambers, Manville, sir. What plays?"

"I've been instructed to watch out for you, sir."

"Watch out for me for why, sir?"

"I am instructed to take you to Mr. Surf immediately upon your return, sir."

"And where has the Surf receded to?'

"Heh heh heh." Horseteeth glittered in a half-neigh half-yes.

"What the hell was that?" I said.

"Laughter, sir. Laughter is good for the soul, balm for the

psyche. Too much of our natural laughter is repressed by the incestuous mother-image on one side and the homosexual father-image on the other but if we exclude both from our frame of reference—"

"Oh no! How convertible can our couches get! Manville, *are* you the permanent butler or are you a Freudulent imposter?"

"Freud?" He sniffed. "Old hat, cocked hat. No. Not Freud. When I was young I was a Jungian but then I moved on to Adler and when that shoe didn't fit I transferred to Reik but then I discovered that Reik was wrong for me. Right now I'm Horney."

"Manville, if you're horny, why pick on me, unless you're a horny pansy?"

"Karen Horney, sir."

"Look. Please. Let's skip the couch-bit, huh? If Mr. Surf has told you to watch out for me because you and I can make it together on a couch or on a mattress or even on the bare-assed floor —that was Mr. Surf's idea of a joke. I go for girl-butlers not boy-butlers."

"Oh no, sir. Mr. Surf wants me to take you to him immediately."

"Where the hell is he?"

"In the little study on the top floor. Will you come with me, sir?"

We tunneled through the cocktailers to a busy kitchen where in the rear there was a small elevator which whisked us to the tip of the triplex, the top floor, which was off-limits for the boozing book-lovers. There was a long quiet carpeted corridor ending at a door which Manville opened for me.

"There you are sir," he said and flashed his horseteeth and went away.

"Well, well," said Alfred Surf. "Come in, come in."

"I'm in, I'm in," I said.

Surf closed the door behind me.

It was a small comfortable room, every wall lined with books from floor to ceiling. A small chandelier sprayed an amber illumination. There were two wide windows fitted with venetian blinds. There was a fine brown desk, a fine brown rug, and fine brown leather armchairs. In one of the fine brown leather armchairs sat a fine brown man. He was suntanned, elegant, graceful, imposing.

"Peter Chambers," said Alfred Surf, "meet Barry Howard."

"Charmed," said Barry Howard, rising, smiling.

He was tall, slender, distinguished, in his middle fifties, but beautifully preserved. He had excellent teeth, dimples in his brown cheeks, frost-white hair neatly combed, large grey intelligent eyes

crinkled with humor at the corners, a firm jaw and a strong chin. He was conservatively dressed in an expensively tailored black suit, a cream-colored shirt obviously custom-made, and a maroon tie with matching maroon silk kerchief in his breast pocket. He was a handsome, commanding man: assured, confident, composed, veritably breathing wealth, refinement, breeding, culture. He had a deep rich baritone voice, an aura of accomplishment, and a forceful dominant but disarming presence.

"Mr. Surf has told me so *much* about you, he said. "I'm indeed glad to meet you, Mr. Chambers."

He came forward with extended hand.

I did not take his hand, but I gave him mine.

I gave him my hand, rolled up into knuckles, directly at his chin. The fine brown face went blank as he sank gracefully to the fine brown rug.

"Holy cow!" said Alfred Surf. "Are you out of your goddamned mind?"

"With glee," I said.

"Look, I know you're eccentric, but that eccentric I didn't think. That's a fine way to say hello. What've you got against the guy?"

"He's not my dish of tea."

"Well, from the looks of things, I wouldn't say you're his cup of Kafka either. This you're going to collaborate?"

My eyes scouted the room and settled on the windows. "How do you want your blinds?" I said.

"Pete, if you're loaded—"

"How do you want your blinds?"

"What do you *mean* how do I want my blinds?"

"Drawn, as they are, or open? Take your choice, but you're going to have to stay with that choice for a while. Now how do you want them?"

He gulped. "Just as they are, but . . ."

I vanquished the sills and stole from the blinds and climbed down and used one of the cords, leaving long ends, for Mr. Howard's wrists and used the other of the cords, leaving long ends, for Mr. Howard's ankles. I made him comfortable in a comfortable armchair and made short shrift of the long ends, attaching him firmly. His breathing, even while comatose, was elegant. He snored gently.

Surf watched with eyes bugged until I was through. Then in the small still voice generally reserved for address to a dangerous lunatic, he said, "What the hell?"

"Meet Frankie Nigle," I said.

SIXTEEN

"WHO THE hell is Frankie Nigle?" said Alfred Surf.

"He is," I said.

"He's Barry Howard."

"He's Frankie Nigle."

"Okay, so he's Frankie Nigle. I told you he was a man of many names. So he's Frankie Nigle. Does that give you the office to paste him one? Does that give you the office to truss him up like that?"

"I trussed him, now place your truss in me, pal. Peace. Patience. Hang on to everything, including yourself."

His eyes behind his specs were speculative but frightened. I knew he could start pushing buttons and his butlers could button me up and muffle me up while releasing my captivating captive who could then smooth-talk his way the hell out of there. I said, "Alfred, while you're still numb in the belief that I'm nuts, answer this question. Is there an entrance to this floor of your triplex without going through the other two floors?"

"Why?"

"Because we're going to have an invasion of blue men and I don't want to spoil your party."

He was now as walleyed as a staring pollack (which is a fish, not a native of Poland). "Invasion of blue men?" he whispered. "Pete, sit down, huh? Take it easy. You had a rough night last night. You drank a good deal. You've probably drunk a good deal today. You haven't had enough rest. You're overwrought, overworked. I'll call—"

"No, you're not going to call. I'm going to call."

"Whom?"

"The blue men."

"Sit down. Rest a bit."

"Cops," I said. "The blue men. Cops." I smiled. "You want me to write a book for you, don't you? Im a literary party, arent I? So what's so nuts if I'm infected, if I use a literary-type expression."

His eyes improved. "Why cops?"

"For this guy." I indicated the sleeping Howard.

"But you don't even know him."

"You're wrong. We've met."

"But he didn't say—"

"He doesn't know that we've met."

The eyes popped again, a good deal of the whites showing. "Pete, you're not making sense."

"Will you please answer my question? Than I'll make my call and you'll see, it'll all make sense."

"What question?"

"Can the cops come in on this floor? Can they come in without disturbing your party?"

"Yes. Instead of going to the twenty-first floor, they go to the twenty-third. They ring the bell of 23 BB. But there's no one on this floor except us."

"Fine. So you'll answer the door." I went to the phone on the desk. "Is there an extension to this?"

"Next door, in a small bedroom. Why?"

"Go there while I make my call. Pick up the extension and listen. I just don't have the time to go into it all now. Just listen and you'll understand."

A frown made furrows on his forehead; he hesitated; but then he went. I called Homicide and asked for Lieutenant Anthony Generoso.

"He's busy," said the man on the other end. "Who's calling?"

"Peter Chambers."

"He's very busy, Mr. Chambers, and unless its important—"

"Tell him it's about the murder of Charles R. Medford."

There was a moment's hush. Then sharply he said, "Hang on."

After the clicks came Generoso's voice. "Pete?"

"Hi, Tony."

"Pete, we haven't broken this thing yet. How the devil do you know . . . ?"

I talked quickly. "You got a call from a John Maxwell from the office of the Nigle Realty Company. You came there and found Medford—"

"How the hell do you know this?"

"I was John Maxwell."

His voice grew soft with suppressed excitement. "Where are you, Peter?"

"I'm at the home of Alfred Surf, Six-forty Park Avenue. I've got Frankie Nigle here for you."

"You—*what?*" It almost snapped my ear off.

"I've got him tied up nice and comfortable. Mr. Surf has a triplex apartment and he's running a party in it. You and your gentlemen don't want to spoil Mr. Surf's party, do you?"

"No, no, of course not." He was back to the velvet of suppressed excitement.

"You'll go up to the twenty-third floor and ring the bell of 23 BB. Mr. Surf himself will open the door for you. That's the top floor of the triplex and there's no party going on there except our party. And you needn't rush, Tony. The guy isn't going anywhere. Mr. Nigle is guaranteed trussed, you can invest your negotiable instrument on that."

"Stay with it, Pete."

"Wild hearses couldn't drag me away, old mustang."

Tony Generoso was right there on the ball. "Don't catch colt while waiting and don't get the works foaled up. See you soon. Bye, Pete."

Generoso hung up, Surf hung up, I hung up.

Surf came back wearing an expression of bafflement. "Murder?" he said.

I glanced at Barry Howard. His eyes were still closed. He was taking his time. He was overdue for a return to the fold. I had not hit him that hard. He was probably awake, hot under the drops of the eaves, playing it cool. Let him. Anything I had to say, he could hear.

"Murder," I said.

"But throughout his entire autobiography, he stressed the fact that he was against murder, against mayhem, against any form of violence."

"That was the autobiography of Barry Howard, not the autobiography of Frankie Nigle. A guy with all the names he's got—there's probably more than *one* autobiography in him."

The grey eyes opened. The handsome mouth smiled. "There is but *one* autobiography, my dear sir. Every word I dictated was gospel."

"Well, maybe it was gospel before you murdered Charlie Medford, Mr. Nigle."

"I didn't murder anyone and I'm not Mr. Nigle."

"Aren't you, pal?"

"There is no Mr. Nigle."

"You wish there weren't, I'm sure."

"There's a Miss Nigle."

"Beg pardon?"

"There's a Miss Nigle," he said. "Frankie Nigle is not a man. Frankie Nigle is a woman."

SEVENTEEN

"NOW JUST a minute, you two," said Alfred Surf. "I don't care if this Frankie Nigle is man, woman, or child. I'm hung up in the middle here, cops have been invited to my party, and I haven't the least idea of what *any* of this is all about. Will somebody, please, damn, tell me?"

I told him. I gave him my version. I told him everything I knew as pertained to Charles R. Medford. "So you see," I said, "that's what I meant when I said I had met Frankie Nigle—I mean Barry Howard—and he didn't meet me."

"According to Mr. Surf," said Barry Howard, "you've also met Frankie Nigle."

"According to *me?*" said Surf. "But I don't know a Frankie Nigle."

"You told me that Mr. Chambers had been talking to the lady whom I escorted here."

"That's Frances Elgin."

"Frankie Nigle."

"Oh brother," I said, "would I love that if it's true."

"It's true," said Howard. "Easily provable, as a matter of fact." He squirmed. "I do wish you'd release me, Mr. Chambers."

"Sorry," I said. "Not till we get cops. Now how—easily provable?"

"Frances—a woman's name frequently corrupted to Frankie. Nigle—simply spell Elgin backwards."

"Holy cow!" said Surf.

"And she's the dame," I said, "that Charlie Medford happened to meet at Penelope Arlington's party?"

"Precisely—except that he didn't *happen* to meet her. It was carefully *arranged* that he meet her."

"By whom?"

"By me."

"Mr. Howard," I said, "you've denied that you murdered Charlie Medford. Yet you were there with Charlie's corpse in the office of Nigle Realty Company. Now if you didn't, who . . . ?"

"Who—if I didn't?"

"Frankie Nigle?"

"Who else?"

"Look, Mr. Howard, did you ever hear of a felony-murder?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"What I mean is this. Your laying it onto Frankie Nigle won't do you a bit of good. If you two were involved in some sort of swindle perpetrated on Charlie Medford, and *she* killed him during the perpetration of this swindle, you are just as guilty of the murder as she. That's the law."

"Nevertheless, she killed him. I admit that I tried to clean up after her, but she killed him. Also, according to the letter of the law, I do *not* believe that I'm guilty of murder. This murder was done *after* the felony, the swindle, was completed." He sighed. "All of this could have been academic except that you blundered into the office of Nigle Realty."

That cut to the quick, the quick being the profession I profess. "That was no blunder, Mr. Howard. That was acute detection by an acute detective, your humble collaborator."

"Barry," said Surf, "you'd better spill it right now before the police clamp down on you. Two reasons. One altruistic, one selfish. Altruistic—as Mr. Chambers has already demonstrated, he's quite an expert in the field, and after he hears your story, he may be able to render some of his expert advice. Selfish—because if this does turn out to be the last chapter of your career, it will also turn out to be the last chapter of the book—and, Christ, what a last chapter this will make!"

Whatever else the man had, he had poise. The fine grey eyes smiled at me. "Each to his own, eh?" he said.

"You've got nothing to lose, Mr. Howard," I said.

"To gain," said Surf, "the possibility of slipping out from under a murder rap. And if not—immortality."

"You mean if *I* get the electric chair, *you* get a bestseller."

Glowingly Surf said, "But a runaway bestseller without a doubt and on that *I'm* an expert."

Ah, each to his own.

"I'll begin at the beginning and tell it as quickly as possible," said Howard, "and for *my* sake, although not yours, Mr. Surf, I hope my collaborator agrees with me that I have a loophole, although I admit mine is a biased view."

"Okay," I said. "Talk it up, Mr. Howard."

"It began in London, this past February, where I was vacationing, taking my ease as Count Philip Maroufke of the Belgian aristocracy. It was there that I met Frances Elgin. She had been liv-

ing in London for about a year as the . . . er . . . houseguest of a British photographer who had done rather well for himself. At the time I met her she had been . . . er . . . kicked out, dispossessed. She was a native New Yorker and, as you gentlemen have seen, a very beautiful girl. She was an orphan whose father, once, had been in the real estate business and she had a passing knowledge of the jargon of that business. She was short of funds and long on brains—cold, clever, educated, unscrupulous, wayward—perfect for my purposes. As it turned out, she was *too* wayward." He sighed. "We all make our mistakes, I guess. Miss Elgin turned out to be one of my few mistakes." He sighed again. "Mr. Chambers, if you please, would you adjust my bonds?"

I made the adjustment, apologized for the continuing necessity, offered to hold a cigarette for him, but he refused. I held a cigarette for myself and I said, "So you began to set her up as an accomplice?"

"Yes. I gave her money, supported her, began to tell her a bit about myself, found her eager and interested in being a partner in a well-paying well-conceived venture."

"Had this well-conceived venture already been conceived?"

"Partially."

"For here in New York?"

"Yes. I had frequently visited New York, but never professionally. Now certain circumstances had begun to dovetail and I'm a great believer in striking while the circumstances are hot."

"And these hot circumstances involved Charlie Medford?"

"Yes. I had heard about him, some time in January as a matter of fact, from a wealthy old lady, one Mrs. Celia Krause, who was visiting in London and who was being charming to the charming nobleman, Count Philip Maroufke. Somehow, during some of her rambling tales, Mr. Medford's name came up. I heard that he was the Head of the Loan Department of the New York National Bank, that he was a widower, that he was somewhat of a playboy, that he was susceptible to beautiful women, and that he was a dear friend of Penelope Arlington and a frequenter of her myriad parties. Of course, Penelope Arlington is an international name. At that time it occurred to me that Mr. Medford would be an excellent subject for my ministrations, but it was merely a fleeting thought. After I met Miss Elgin, the thought reoccurred."

"But no longer fleeting."

"It jelled, as a matter of fact. The entire concept of a really beautiful swindle fairly sprang into being. In February, I flew in to New York."

"As Count Maroufke?"

"No. Under the name on my passport, Barry Howard."

"With Miss Elgin?"

"No. Alone. Actually it was a scouting expedition. I was prepared to invest a good sum of money in my venture. I wanted to protect any such investment in advance. I wanted to be certain that Medford was my man."

"Did he pass your test?"

"With flying colors. I made discreet inquiries about him. I learned that he was an officer of the bank, that he had authority, that he frequently dealt in large sums of money and often in cash transactions. Unobserved, I observed him in various play-spots. He loved life and he loved women. I also learned that he was unattached, that he *was* a good friend of Miss Arlington, and that he was a regular at all of her parties. I flew back to England, coached Miss Elgin on all the salient points, and on March 12th we arrived here in New York."

"Under your passport names?"

"Yes. Mine, Barry Howard. Hers, her real name, Frances Elgin. But at once, for our purposes, she assumed the name of Frankie Nigle." He wriggled, unhappily. "Mr. Chambers," he said, "I'm beginning to go numb. Is there no other method of assuring yourself that I'll remain docile until the police come?"

Somehow, I felt sorry for the old guy. I said to Surf, "Do you have a gun, Alfred?"

Surf was lost in his last chapter. He blinked his eyes, fighting off, for a moment, the rosy dreams of a cozy bestseller. "What?" he said. "Beg pardon?"

"Do you have a gun?"

"Yes. Yes I do." He took a packet of keys from his pocket, unlocked a drawer, and handed me a huge .45 Colt revolver.

"What do you do with this?" I said. "Hunt elephants?"

"It was recommended as a very serviceable weapon."

"Yeah. But serviceable." I broke it, examined it, was satisfied with it. I laid it on the desk ,went to Barry Howard, tapped him very thoroughly for any concealed weapon. He had no concealed weapon but he sure as hell enjoyed my feeling him.

"Mr. Howard," I said, "I'm no quidnunc . . ."

Surf beamed at me as a teacher beams upon a backward pupil who has suddenly gone frontward. He had taught me a word.

"Mr. Howard," I said, "I'm no quidnunc, but off the record, just for our personal record, may I diverge for one question?"

"Sure."

"Are you a pansy?"

"Sure."

"Thank you." I went back to the desk and picked up the gun. "Mr. Howard," I said, "we now diverge from the divergence and get back on the ball. Only because I am what is known in the parlance as a softboiled richard, I'm going to ask Mr. Surf to untie you. But before I do, I should like to make this plain, *on* the record. You have stolen a hundred thousand dollars from the New York National Bank. You are involved in the murder of a good friend of mine, Mr. Charles R. Medford. If I kill you, I'll receive praise from the public, the police, and all the constituted authorities, aside from a natural if cruel personal satisfaction. I shall therefore say this once—if for any reason whatsoever you get up from that chair, I'll shoot you. If the first bullet from this elephant-gun doesn't kill you, it'll break enough bones to maim you for life. Is that clear, Mr. Howard?"

"Perfectly clear, Mr. Chambers."

"Would you untie him, please, Alfred?"

Surf untied him.

Howard said, "Thank you."

I said, "You're welcome."

"May I smoke now?"

"Do whatever the hell you like but don't get off that chair."

He lit a cigarette, stretched his arms, stretched his legs.

"Let's get back on the ball," I said.

"As I have stated in my autobiography," he said, "there are three necessary elements for a successful swindle. They are—the Big Store, confidence, and surprise."

Surf said, "What's the Big Store?"

"It is the background, the snare, the trap. In what is known in America as the bucket shop—an entire massive busy office is set up as a stockbroker's enterprise, all to capture *one* sucker, but the sucker must be worth the while and the expense. There are other types of Big Stores."

"Tell us about yours," I said.

"At once upon our arrival here, Frances Elgin became Frankie Nigle. I receded into a small inconspicuous hotel here on the East Side, but Miss Nigle spread out into the Big Store."

"Like?" I said.

"First she took a suite in the *Waldorf Astoria* at fifty dollars a day. Then I added to her already expansive wardrobe. Then we found an office for her, not too far away from the New York National."

"Across the street in point of fact," I said.

"Yes. At 515 Fifth Avenue."

"Sam Silverman of Universal Import Limited."

"Ah, you're a good man, Mr. Chambers." He extinguished his cigarette in a nearby ashtray. "We saw this ad in the *New York Times*. It was a perfect location. Mr. Silverman, with his secretary, was going to Europe on the first of April for a six-months' trip and wished to sublet his office. Frankie took it at three hundred dollars a month, payment for the entire six months made in advance. She told him she was a real-estate woman from Rome, here in America for the transaction of some business. I arranged references and recommendations for her from a friend in Rome. On April first, she moved in. In the meantime, she had become acquainted with Mrs. Celia Krause, but by April first, our Big Store was complete."

"Spell it out, won't you, Mr. Howard?" I said.

"Certainly. She was Frankie Nigle, of Nigle Realty Company, 515 Fifth Avenue, a rich and beautiful woman in the real estate business residing in a fifty-dollar-a-day suite at the *Waldorf Astoria*. I figured this for a three-month operation. My investment would be approximately ten thousand dollars. Three months at fifty dollars a day at the *Waldorf* would be approximately forty-five hundred dollars. The office rental was eighteen hundred dollars. Approximately four thousand dollars to refurbish her wardrobe. Total—approximately ten thousand. Not too bad when you are shooting for a hundred thousand, to be consummated within three months."

Surf said, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"What did she tell Mrs. Krause?" I said.

"That was easy. She called the old lady, told her that on a vacation to Rome she had met one Count Maroufke, that Maroufke had insisted that when she get back to New York she look up the delightful Mrs. Krause. The rich Miss Nigle met the rich Mrs. Krause and, by dint of a bit of subtle suggestion, met, in turn, the rich Miss Arlington. Miss Arlington, always on the hunt for beautiful, respectable, unattached young ladies for her parties, was, of course, taken by the redoubtable Miss Nigle, and so, at one of the parties, Miss Nigle met Mr. Medford, and the trap was snapped. The Big Store worked. Miss Nigle, always beautifully clothed, lived in a fine suite at the *Waldorf*, where Mr. Medford visited; had a beautiful office right across the street from the bank where Mr. Medford was employed; was herself charming and beautiful and susceptible to Mr. Medford's advances; and had

business interests in common with him. But they transacted no business together: theirs was a blossoming social relationship. And so the first element took hold—the Big Store was in operation."

"Did Miss Nigle have a secretary there at the office?" I said.

"Of course not. What sense?"

"But didn't Medford visit at the office?"

"Yes. Occasionally during his lunch hour. But that would also be a secretary's lunch hour too, wouldn't it? Sometimes he called for her after business hours, but by then a secretary would be gone, wouldn't she? Oh, the Big Store was in perfect operation."

"The next element," I said. "Confidence."

"Simple. Resisting mightily, Miss Nigle finally succumbed to Mr. Medford's male persuasions. They became lovers. He often slept over with her at her lovely suite at the *Waldorf*. He was mad about her—which is excellent for confidence, wouldn't you say?"

"And now the third element—surprise."

"Ah, here we tread upon delicate ground. They were lovers, they slept together, they went out about the town together, and he was crazy about her, even began to hint about marriage. She played it perfectly as I, from the background, advised. She never accepted a gift from him; on the contrary, she bought him gifts. She never talked any serious business with him, just a smattering here and there, nothing that actually could concern him. On occasion she mentioned a Texan, a man with vast real estate holding here in New York; she mentioned that she was angling for his business; she mentioned that if she could manage his holdings here in New York, her commissions could amount to fifty thousand dollars a year; she was careful never to mention his name. On Wednesday night, we worked the surprise."

"At the *Waldorf?*" I said.

"That is correct. He was to see his son earlier that evening, and then he was to meet her, at eleven o'clock, at *The Persian Room* of the *Waldorf*. When he arrived, the Texan was there, at the table with her."

"Who was the Texan?"

"I was, of course." Suddenly, wondrously, he was speaking with a perfect Texas accent: his baritone voice went a shade deeper, his vowels grew rounder, his consonants sharper. Surf had told me that the man was a linguist. He had not told me—he had not known—that the man was a consummate mimic. Nobody climbs to the top of a profession without gifts of great talent. Barry Howard was a talented man. "Remember," he said in the marvelous Texas drawl, "the Big Store was in perfect operation, and Miss Nigle had the

full confidence of our sucker. Often people wonder how shrewd, intelligent, above-average individuals can fall prey in a con-game. Easy. If the Big Store is in proper operation—but *proper*, mind you—and full confidence has been established, there is nobody—*nobody*—who isn't vulnerable. Remember that it was firmly established in Charles Medford's mind that Miss Nigle was a rich and successful business woman, and there was *more* than full confidence here—there was a hot and heavy love affair in full blast."

"Okay, okay," I said.

"Her Texas prospect had suddenly fallen in on her. I played it to the hilt—bluff, hearty, and somewhat drunk—with a bottle of bourbon right there on the table. She had told her Texas prospect that she had a date, but that was all right with old Texas, he joined right in. I insisted upon buying supper for them, told them stories, told them jokes, played it wide open and roaringly good-natured drunk. I imagine that by now you can tell that I *can* play the part."

"Absolutely perfect," said Surf. "Marvelous. Unbelievable."

He returned to his normal manner of speech. "She started to introduce us but when she came to my name, I interrupted. 'Tom,' I said. 'Call me Tom. All my friends call me Tom. And any friend of Miss Nigle is a friend of mine.' He never got my last name, I didn't want him to get my last name—I didn't want him to have anything against which to check. He wasn't hungry, but I poured plenty of whiskey into him, and at about twelve o'clock midnight, accidentally on purpose, I began to talk business to Miss Frankie Nigle. We warmed to our subject beautifully—we had rehearsed it all well in advance—and then, and this was timed; I looked at my watch. It was twenty after twelve. 'All right, Miss Nigle,' I said, 'you have the contracts which I've already read. I've checked you and you're the lady for me. But in Texas we like people who can jump to emergencies. Can you jump to an emergency?' 'What sort of emergency?' she said. 'In Texas money talks,' I said. 'A money emergency. Suppose you had to come up, sudden-like, with a hundred thousand in cash. Could you do it? Could you handle that?' 'Of course,' she said. 'Very well, ma'am,' I said. 'It's now twenty after twelve at night. I'll be in your office at twenty after twelve in the afternoon. You show me a hundred thousand bucks in cash, and I sign that contract spang on the barrel-head. By twelve-thirty I'm out of your office and you've got yourself a contract for ten years. That's the way we do business in Texas, ma'am. You put your money where your mouth is. You pony up when you call a bluff. You're okay in my book, ma'am. Ill see you tomorrow at

twelve-twenty sharp. They call me a crazy Texan. I don't think I'm crazy at all. I think I make a hell of a lot of sense.' And I called for the check and I paid it and I left them there with the bottle of bourbon and I hear that Mr. Medford did it full justice."

"He was wearing the same clothes . . . " I began.

"He slept over at the *Waldorf* with the lady, a skillful lady, I must say. The rest worked as we had expected—*better* than we had expected. No coaxing was needed on her part and of course she never mentioned the Texan's name. In bed, he was high, and she was worried. A hundred thousand to convince the crazy Texan was no problem—but it would take her at least a day to get it together and he wanted it by twenty after twelve that next afternoon. It meant a contract for ten years with commissions of fifty thousand dollars a year. Bourbon-soaked and love-happy he rose to the bait like a hungry fish, poor fish. He would bring it over from the bank. It was just across the street. It was nothing, no trouble, no inconvenience, and why shouldn't he help, since it was so simple, and he was in a position to help. She actually had to remonstrate with him."

"Yeah. I bet."

"Of course she did. She's clever and can perform to all the nuances. She remonstrated—would it create any difficulty for him? Oh, she didn't want him to do *any*thing that was in the *least* out of order; after all he worked for a *bank,* and banks could be awfully *persnickety. He* had to reassure *her.* Remember always the Big Store, the complete confidence, his trust in her, and, in this case, his infatuation with her. It was nothing, he told her. It was a small favor, the very least he could do, and he was delighted that he was in a position to do so. It was not as though he were using the bank's money for any risk-purpose. The money would be no more than a prop to satisfy the whim of a rich and crazy Texan, and it *would* close an excellent deal for her. As a matter of fact, he was doing the *bank* a favor. He was soliciting business for the bank. This gave him a rationale, made him chuckle. He *was* soliciting business for the bank. He hoped, that after this favor from the bank, Nigle Realty would become a client of the bank. Ah, the marvelous convolutions of the human mind; the justifications once the mind is set on a certain course. He was hooked, the poor guy, so strongly he would have been *insulted* had she refused him. We had prepared long and carefully, and it paid off. It worked. Perfectly."

"Holy cow!" said Alfred Surf.

"Mr. Surf," said Howard, "it could have happened to you, were you properly prepared and, I venture to say, even to the experi-

enced Mr. Chambers, were *he* properly prepared. Small fish are not involved in big swindles; always the victims are rich, resourceful, bright, alert, intelligent. None of any of this can be considered a reflection upon Mr. Medford."

"No reflection," I said. "Only he's dead."

"Unfortunate. Extremely unfortunate, for everybody concerned. Were he alive, I wouldn't be here, and you wouldn't be there, pointing a gun at me."

"Where would you be, Mr. Howard?"

"In Paris by now. Free and clear, richer, and unsullied. We had plane tickets for an 8 P.M. takeoff on Thursday, yesterday. All of our bags—except one of hers—were already at the airport."

"So what happened?"

"Thursday morning I called her and she reported that everything was fine. She called him at the bank, and all was in order. Then she checked out of the hotel, took her bag, and came to the office. He arrived a bit early, at five after twelve. He had the money. She shot him. She owned a gun, properly registered in her name, of which I had no knowledge."

Surf stirred. "But you're supposed to be against violence."

"This was *not* part of the plan, Mr. Surf, I hasten to assure you."

"According to Mr. Surf," I said, "you're a pacificist."

"Rather a realist," said Howard. "Follow me, if you will. My sort of peculation is not armed robbery. It is larceny which, actually, is a lesser offense carrying lesser penalty. In my sort of operation, if you are caught, you are caught quickly, or you are not caught at all. Caught quickly, you still have the money. Still having the money—and with a great show of effort—you can make restitution. Restitution *always* mitigates toward a reduction of penalty."

"But not armed robbery . . . ?" said Surf.

"*Especially* if someone is badly injured. And if somebody is killed"—he shrugged—"that's murder, and for murder, the risk is the forfeiture of your life. I prize my life too highly."

"So she killed him on her own?" I said.

"Exactly. The plan was this. I was to arrive, strike him on the head with a sandbag—an old-fashioned weapon but one which renders an individual unconscious without undue injury. It was, as a matter of fact, Mr. Chambers, the weapon with which I struck you. There were no undue side-effects, were there?"

That brought a laugh, all around. In his own way, the guy was a comic. In his own way, the guy was a pleasant provocative man.

A cog had slipped and the machinery was now churning him toward the chair but I had a feeling that all along the way people were going to feel sorry for him, including the electrician who would pull the final switch. "No," I said. "No undue side-effects."

"So? What was the plan?" said Surf.

"I would render him unconscious, tie him up with a length of rope already prepared—"

"Yes, I found that," I said.

"Then we would transfer his attache case to her bag, lock the office, go to the airport, and, in time, take our plane. Once in Paris, we would divide the spoils—less my ten thousand dollar investment—and go our separate ways."

"Suppose somebody found him, tied up in the office?" I said.

"Mr. Chambers, I'm an expert. Every part of this operation was duly considered in advance. Yes. Suppose he was found—and let us put it the worst way—he was found rather early. So? The police would be seeking a Frankie Nigle and a Texan named Tom. So what? Miss Nigle was a resident of the Waldorf and was no longer a resident. There was no link to Miss Frances Elgin. There was no link to me. Even her reference to Silverman from my friend in Rome—phoney. The friend had used an assumed name and fraudulent business stationery. They would run up against one dead end after another. There was no possible link to either of us. It would end up as another unsolved crime."

"Why should his murder have changed any of that?" said Surf.

I said, "Why did she kill him?"

"One question at a time, if you please," said Howard. "I'll take yours first, Mr. Chambers. She killed him—as she explained to me—because then he could never identify her. That way—if it worked—there could never be any possibility of apprehending her."

"A good enough reason," I said. "And she was right. *If* it worked, she was out, free and clear. There was only one witness to the swindle, the sucker himself, and he would be dead."

"She didn't consult with me because she knew of my prohibition against that sort of violence. She did it on her own and, of course, she botched it."

"That should bring you around to answering my question," said Surf.

"Yes. Miss Elgin is a bright young woman but as a criminal, of course, she is an amateur. Only professional criminals are successful criminals—Mr. Chambers, I'm certain, can bear me out on that. Amateurs simply don't know enough: they haven't devoted their life, their time, their brain-power exclusively to their profes-

sion. Anyway, at five minutes after twelve, Miss Elgin shot him. Then she acted quickly and in a manner which you, Mr. Surf, were you on her side, would approve. She was cognizant of the fact that one gets rid of a murder weapon as quickly as possible. In her suitcase, there was a paper bag. She wrapped the gun in the paper bag, went out into the street, threw the bag into a sewer on the corner, returned to the office, and waited for me. As I said, you might approve of that, Mr. Surf. I'm certain that Mr. Chambers wouldn't approve."

"I wouldn't?" I said and with my free hand I scratched at my head. "Why?"

"Because that gun was registered in her name."

"I wouldn't," I said.

Surf scratched *his* head. "Why not?"

"Sewers have grates," said Howard. "An object like that does not pass directly into the sewage system. There could be no telling how soon it would be discovered nor by what means. Once a gun is discovered it is turned over to the police. A check on that gun would produce the name and address of the owner. This, of course, would not be fatal to us. The person's name would be revealed as Frances Elgin. Her address would be somewhere in East Ninety-first Street. She hasn't lived there for more than a year. So it would be merely the finding of a lost gun with no idea as to its owner. To us, it could only prove fatal if linked to a dead man, to a murdered man, to Charles R. Medford."

"Why?" said Alfred Surf.

"A lost gun is a lost gun and if the owner can't be discovered it's still part of ordinary routine. But if that gun is connected to a murder, the police are galvanized into action. All ships, trains, planes are checked for reservations—for a possible escaping murderer. The alias of Frankie Nigle served our purpose perfectly. As Frankie Nigle, she was part of a swindle scheme. As Frances Elgin she was a free agent. But as Frances Elgin she had a reservation on an 8 o'clock plane for Paris. And if the body were discovered, the police would be seeking Frances Elgin as a murderess. It complicated matters dreadfully. I couldn't go poking around in a sewer looking for a gun. On the other hand, I couldn't have the police seeking Frances Elgin as a murderess. Swindlers must stick together. One can always implicate the other. I had to go along with her, back her up, get clear of the murder. There was only one method. There had to be a delay in the discovery of the body."

"Now wait a minute," said Surf. "Then why couldn't you just stay there in the office until plane-time, and then take off?"

"The charwomen," said Howard.

"Always the charwomen," I said.

"The charwomen?" said Surf.

"It was an eight o'clock plane," said Howard. "We'd have to quit that office by about seven. If the cleaning women then discovered the body and reported it to the police, and they did have the gun, we could still be headed off, and if not headed off—the gendarmes would be waiting for us in Paris."

"Yes, yes, I see," said Surf. "So what did you do?"

"Oh, there were so many things to do. First I called the airline for a change in our reservations. The best they could do for us was for midnight tonight, and we accepted. Then I took all of his—Medford's—effects from his pockets, and his attache case, and packed them into Miss Elgin's suitcase. Then I left her—there always had to be somebody left there with the body, just in case—and took a new hotel room at the *Roosevelt* where I left the suitcase. I paid for a week in advance and kept the key. I registered as Mr. and Mrs. Barry Howard of Baltimore and said my wife was due some time during the day. Then I went out and purchased a new attache case and a hunting knife. I transferred the money to the new attache case and checked that as containing valuables with the desk clerk. Then I went back to the room and used the knife to cut up Medford's attache case obliterating his initials which were on it. Then I checked the phone book for a nearby delicatessen store and called for sandwiches and coffee and cake but each in a separate bag. When they were delivered, I ate some, but not all, there was too much. Then into each bag with the leftover food I inserted the pieces of the cut up attache case and the knife. I made separate trips with each bag to different trash baskets, getting rid of the attache case and the knife. Then I went back to the office of Nigle Realty."

"Christ," said Surf. "All of that must have taken a hell of a long time."

"Too much time, but all necessary."

"And all the while," I said, "that chick was in the office alone with the body?"

"She was sick when I got back. I gave her the key to the hotel room, told her she was Mrs. Howard, told her to get some food, a couple of drinks, and then freshen up and rest up, and then come back to me in the office. While she was gone, I made my plans for the disposition of the body—which would give us time. She returned at four-thirty, damned late. I went over to Abercrombie & Fitch for a steamer trunk. They promised to deliver it to the office

early today. I couldn't take a steamer trunk with me at that time —rush hour beginning, trouble with cabs, and I couldn't delay it because the store would close. I came back to the office. We stayed there all night, keeping the lights on, staving off the cleaning women by telling them we were working."

"Holy cow!" said Surf.

"And in the morning?" I said.

"I went out for the purchase of those stacks of newspapers. After they were delivered, I went back to the hotel, showered, shaved, had my clothes pressed, and came back to the office. I sent her back to the hotel for sleep and rest. I called Railway Express to pick up a steamer trunk. I made it for five o'clock, the later the better—our plane was for midnight. I called Abercrombie & Fitch, and they told me the trunk was in delivery. That damned thing didn't show up until three-thirty. I had nothing to do but sit around. I called Surf and told him I'd attend his party. Why not? Once that trunk was en route, what better did I have to do? That damned trunk arrived at three-thirty. Then Mr. Chambers arrived. You know the rest."

"Holy cow!" said Alfred Surf. Expletives, even in the best of us, stay in monotonous pattern. Alfred was bovine-blessed by sacred cows.

"We don't know *all* the rest, Mr. Howard," I said.

"I went back to the hotel. I told her of the new developments. Her amateur meddling had stacked our troubles real high now. I was hoping against hope that that gun wasn't found—but we couldn't risk making that plane at midnight. We abandoned that, together with our bags. I called an individual in Chicago, an expert in the forging of passports. I ordered a new passport for her under the name of Florence Esmond, a brunette, her photo to be taken when we got there. She made an appointment for tomorrow morning with a beauty parlor to have her hair dyed. I made train reservations for tomorrow for Chicago. Once there and with the new passport, we'd fly to the West Coast, from there take off for Honolulu, and from there work our way to Europe. Once there, she'd stay with her new name, build a background on it, get married, go to hell, whatever. Once there, I'd get rid of her. Once there, perhaps, even, I'd have her liquidated. Violence breeds violence: she could be a threat to my very existence. I don't know. I'm not sure. I cannot, in all candor, predict my course. In the meantime I wanted her close by me. I wanted no more of her free-lance meddling. We came here to this party. Why not? What safer place than a mad literary party—and I did want to meet you, Mr.

Chambers. So—a woman is a woman, an amateur an amateur—I'm about to introduce her to Mr. Surf as Mrs. Howard, and I just get to saying, 'Mr. Surf, I want you to meet—' when she sticks out her lily-white paw and says, 'I'm Frances Elgin. How do you do? I've heard so much about you.' "

"She did at that, didn't she?" said Surf. And to me he said, "I was with Topsy Twits at the moment. I said, 'Topsy Twits, Mr. Barry Howard, Miss Frances Elgin.' "

"A most strikingly beautiful woman, that Miss Twits," said Howard.

"You noticed?" I said.

"Who could help but notice?" he said. "However, that was that. An amateur is an amateur. I suppose my dear partner, under prior instruction, was so intent upon forgetting that she was ever Frankie Nigle, that her real name, under unconscious impetus, just shot out of her. I had told her, time and again, that once our work was accomplished, she must forever forget the Frankie Nigle—that Frances Elgin, as a name, was a part of her defense. Our swindle was old. Her murder was new. She fell back on her defense—Frances Elgin. Damn all amateurs. What could I do? Scream? We *were* at a literary party, and names *do* get lost, and I *was* hoping against hope that the name meant nothing yet, that that gun hadn't yet been found . . ."

"And then I showed up," I said.

"You did indeed," said Barry Howard. A small sigh rippled his lips. He lit a new cigarette. He said, "Back to the professionals, if you please, Mr. Chambers. Of course, I shall retain excellent lawyers and all of that. Of course, the money is intact, and restitution shall be made in full. Comparatively, these are minor problems, as compared to the major problem. A felony-murder, in the law, renders all of the members participating in the felony guilty of the individual act of murder by any one of the members—*provided the murder takes place during the commission of the felony*. Is that correct?"

"Correct."

"And the felony here would be a conspiracy to embezzle?"

"So?"

"You can imagine that I've given this matter some thought?"

"I can imagine."

"I maintain that the felony was completed *before* the murder, and that, in such case, the murder was the sole and exclusive act of *one* individual, and not binding upon or attaching to any other individual."

"How so?" said Surf, shake of head and click of tongue a clucking revelation of involuntary admiration for his newest author.

"I maintain that the felony was complete when Mr. Medford showed up at the office of Nigle Realty carrying a hundred thousand dollars. That was it. The job was over, ended. Any act of violence on the part of Miss Elgin was then *after* the felony, an act *apart* from the felony, and therefore her own responsibility, and none of mine. What do you think, Mr. Chambers?"

"It's a delicate question," I said, "and I'm a richard not a lawyer. In my opinion . . ."

I never got to it. The bell rang. Surf rolled off and his tidings on return were a wave of capped cops and a billow of plainclothesmen, five in all, headed by Lieutenant Generoso. There were two uniformed policemen, two bulky detectives in dour mufti, and the slender young lieutenant resplendent in a grey-tweed raglan topcoat. Our tales wagged again: first mine, then Howard's; and then I returned Surf's elephant-gun.

"Lieutenant Generoso," I said, "would you permit me the signal honor of flicking the chick for you?"

"Peter," he said, "your hip talk dislocates me. You seem to be making some sort of request."

"I request that you permit me to go downstairs and fetch the gal for you—Frances Elgin."

Dryly he said, "Why? Don't you think we can handle it?"

"Look, you're not sore about any of this, are you?"

"Let's put it this way—I'm not pleased. I'm not crazy about private detectives—not even on television. I don't like what you pulled—that John Maxwell deal. You did some nice detective-work with that address book which led you to the body—but even that was not your province. It was your duty to turn that address book over to the police who were working on Mr. Medford's disappearance with the hundred thousand dollars. But certainly, once you discovered the body—you should have called up and stayed put and waited for us."

"Why vie over spilled bilk? The theft is cleaned up, and the murder is solved. You've got Barry Howard right here, and you've got the hundred thousand waiting for you at the *Roosevelt*. All I'm asking is that you permit me to go downstairs and bring back Frances Elgin."

"Why?"

"It's personal. Cripes, can't you give an inch? Aren't I entitled to *one* lousy little favor. Look, I'm not crazy about police-lieuten-

ants—not even on television. There's only *one* police-lieutenant I am crazy about . . ."

"Yeah. I know. You're Parker's boy—not mine."

"Tony, *I* threw this case into your lap and you're going to get a lot of credit for its solution. Fine by me. I don't want any credit. All I want is one lousy little favor . . ."

Surf intervened. "Lieutenant, I'm running a big party downstairs. An arrest down there would create a shambles. Actually, Mr. Chambers is making his request on my behalf . . ."

That gave Generoso his out. "Okay," he grumbled, "but do it fast, and don't muff it."

"No muff there for me," I said and went out and walked the long quiet corridor to the elevator and punched the button and descended to the kitchen and panned past the chefs and was embroiled once again within the caldron of the merrymakers, seeking the lady in blue. Generoso could not understand and I could not explain: this mission was for me. What could I tell the good lieutenant?—that I was sentimental? Sentimentality is not for the mentality of the private richard: it is a bitter-sweet to be enjoyed by those in less hard-bitten professions. The lady had killed my friend. It was fitting that I deliver her.

I found her, this time tall in the thrall of only one man, a huge unliterary specimen without a beard.

"Miss Elgin," I said.

"Oh no. Not *you* again."

"Do you know him?" said the huge specimen.

Her icy eyes slitted in distaste. "An egregious, ineffable bore. The humble-pie type. He makes me ill."

"Beat it, buster," said the specimen.

"Butt out," I said. "I have a message for the lady."

"He has a message he says," he said.

"He's tried to get through with his message before. He's a damnable bore. I'm not receiving."

"I come not now with any message from me," I said. Pretty flighty, eh? What the hell, this *was* a literary party. "I come crawling to Your Highness as a lowly messenger-boy."

"See what I mean about humble pie? This disgusting man simply won't take no for an answer."

"Beat it, buster," said the specimen.

My right hand became a knuckled ball. Not for him. For her.

I resisted. I said, "Your Majesty, my message is from . . . Barry Howard."

"Walter," she said to the specimen, "would you please go there

to the bar and get me a drink? Drambuie, please." The beardless bull hoisted a smile, oxed no more questions, and hoofed off on a steer toward the bar. "A message," she said, "from *whom,* Mr. Er?"

"Count Maroufke."

The cold eyes turned on the heat. "I *beg* your pardon?" But the arrogance was crippled by a splint of anxiety.

"That's what he told me to say, ma'am, in case you didn't take me seriously. Count Maroufke. What does it mean, Count Maroufke?"

"I have no idea. Where is he?"

"Count Maroufke?"

"Mr. Howard."

"He's upstairs with Mr. Alfred Surf in Mr. Surf's small study."

"Upstairs?"

"The top floor. This is a triplex. Something like when you give birth to three babies all at once."

The Count Maroufke had thrown her. But she was a quick recovery. She was back on her high saddle. "Exceedingly funny. Now if you please . . . how can we possibly . . . with this mob . . . ?"

"There's some sort of servants' elevator in the rear through the kitchen. Now if Your Highness won't be discommoded by a lift in the servants' elevator . . ."

Hauteur snobbed up again grandly. "If you'll kindly lead the way . . ."

"Your humble-pie servant, Your Majesty. By your leave, or your leaf, or your entire bush, follow the assle of your vassal, my liege-lady; onward through yon thicket of skillet, fry-pans beating like cymbals in a tympany of titular reverence . . ."

What in hell could she do but follow? The vassal had knocked her on *her assle* by the mention of Maroufke. She knew it was legit. She knew I wasn't throwing a fast one past her. She knew that Howard had furnished me with a cryptic (*she* thought) password that could not be ignored.

Her silence was cold through the hot kitchen, descending to freezing as we ascended in the small elevator. On the top floor I pointed to the far door and said, "There's where he wants you." We were halfway along the quiet corridor when the door opened and Lieutenant Generoso emerged, impatiently.

"Who's he?" she said

"Lieutenant Generoso."

"Lieutenant—who?"

"Generoso"

"Who's he?"

"A lieutenant."
"Of what?"
"Police."
"What does he want?"
"He wants you."
"Me?"
"For the murder of Charles R. Medford."

She turned and ran. I ran after and grabbed a wrist. She pulled but I pulled her back. The claws of her free hand came up to scratch but they never arrived. With pleasure but not permitting the pleasure to interfere with direction, I hauled off and belted her Not too hard. Just hard enough to satisfy everybody all around.

EIGHTEEN

BARRY HOWARD went away handcuffed to one of the policemen in uniform. Frances Elgin went away handcuffed to the other of the policemen in uniform. One of the detectives muffled in mufti, but unhandcuffed so that he could drive, accompanied them. The other of the detectives in muffled mufti was ruffled off to a shuffle with the desk-man at *Hotel Roosevelt,* his object to impound one hundred thousand clams cramped to a chowder of illicit money within a licit lissome-leathered new-bought attache case. That left Lieutenant Anthony Generoso whose reluctant object was I. Wrapped within imperious mantle of raglan topcoat he declared with modestly muted authority, "You'll come with me now, Pete."

"Oh no!" cascaded the Surf in a Niagara of negation. "He and I have a monumental Last Chapter to discuss."

"Oh no!" cascaded I in a simple trickle of simple-minded dedication. "I must go to 14 Sutton Place at once."

"Oh yes!" cascaded Generoso generating a pisspotful of streaming bossism. "*I'm* in charge here. I'm averse to pulling rank but in this case, sorry, but I must turn a deaf ear to your heartrending croaks and cries concerning the immediacy of other business. Chambers goes downtown with me—now! There are more questions to be propounded for the files, more answers to be adduced, odds and ends to be ended, papers to be signed, and statements sworn." Generoso was one of our latter-day career-cops: careering through college and copping all the prizes and then deciding upon police-work as the life-work. He could rattle more polysyllables in a moment of excitement than a Russian could rattle missiles in a foment of fear.

"But the *book,*" said Surf.

"But Sutton *Place,*" said I.

"But nuts," said Generoso. "Do you come peacefully, Peter, or do you require handcuffs like the other miscreants?"

"*I'm* a miscreant?" I said sorrowing visibly.

"If you flout the law, what else?" said Generoso grinning risibly.

"And right here, right now, I represent the law, and if that's not a flout you're pulling, what else is it?"

So the phone rang.

So Surf answered it.

So he said, pounding the shore of his white-capped teeth with a rising swell of annoyed propriety: "This telephone call is for you, Mr. Chambers."

"Me?"

"You."

I seized the receiver and breathed, "What?"

"Pete," said Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker in a spray of almost unintelligible syntax, "Sandy Santee doesn't put it past you, although I do, so I apologize in advance for asking, although he insists, for all the good it can do—was anything passed to you while you were here? Ridiculous, huh?"

"Pardon?"

"Ridiculous?"

"What?"

"If anything *was* passed illegitimately—although I *know* you wouldn't be party to anything like that—but if anything *was* passed illegitimately then it doesn't make sense that you'd admit it, but Santee is a lawyer, and lawyers insist upon having things on the record, one way or the other, whatever it may be—so was there?"

"What? Damn!"

"Anything passed to you?"

"Passed to me? What the—"

"Did Jack Medford pass anything to you?"

"Passed the time of the day. What the hell goes, Lieutenant?"

"Look! Can you come down here? Right away?"

"I can, and I want to, but there's a lieutenant here—"

"Let me talk to him."

I extended the thing to Generoso. "The lieutenant wishes to speak to the lieutenant, Lieutenant."

Generoso took hold and the lieutenants conferred and then the phone got banged and Generoso delivered himself of a withering glance.

"Ah, the nipups of the pipsqueaks," he sighed.

"A beautiful title, sir," said Surf.

The withering glance now fell on the churning Surf. "Title for what?"

"Who cares?" said Surf glossily waxing enthusiastic. "It's just a beautiful title. For anything. *Nipups And Pipsqueaks*. Great. May

I have it, sir? Maybe I'll use it for a book of excerpts from Lord Bertrand Russell. Or maybe I'll lend it to Jean Kerr."

"I couldn't Kerr less," said Generoso. "It was meant for Peter here."

"Mud in your withering eye, Lieutenant," I said. "Am I the nip, the pup, the pip, or the squeak?"

"May I have it, Peter?" said the unquenchable Surf.

"It's yours," I said. "May I go now, Lieutenant?"

"Why didn't you tell me that 14 Sutton Place was a police matter?"

"What chance did I have for ejaculation while you were pulling off rank?"

"Who is Rank?" said Surf.

"May I go now, Lieutenant?" I said.

"On condition that you come to me immediately that you're through with Parker."

"You have my promise."

"Then get out of here."

Surf returned to his Last Chapter. "Now wait a *minute!* I must talk with you, Peter. I have a contract with you. I've given you five thousand dollars. You just can't run like that. These developments have been absolutely sensational. Now let's just—"

"I can't, Alfred. I've got to run."

"Will you be at your apartment later?"

"Yes but—"

"I'll see you there."

"What about your party?"

"The hell with my party."

"Goodbye all," I said.

NINETEEN

THE TECHNICIANS were gone, the body was gone, even the muscular Mrs. Monet was gone. There was only a grave male assembly to greet me: Parker, the Pea, Santee, Jack, and assorted cops. Jack was wild-eyed and wheyfaced, tense and explosive, tightly braced between two cops. Santee was pink-faced, pleased, and cordial. Peabody, handsome and arrogant, talked up as soon as I was admitted to the library where they were all now gathered in solemn conclave.

"There's the monkey that pulled the rock on you, Lieutenant. The pretty-boy peeper pulled the old switcheroo. He passed it to you, didn't he, son of a bitch?"

"I didn't pass anything," said Jack Medford.

"What the hell goes here?" I said.

"Look how innocent," said Mike the Pea. "Butter couldn't melt in his goddam mouth. That's a wise old apple, Lieutenant, and he's putting the frig to you but good."

"Quiet," said the lieutenant.

"Quiet," said Sandy Santee.

"That's all I've been hearing," said Mike the Pea. "Quiet. Look, we got free speech here. It's a free country, ain't it?"

"Quiet," said Sandy Santee. "I'll do the talking for you. That's what I'm here for."

"Well, damn, *talk.*"

"Chambers," said Santee, "we're convinced that the brooch was passed to you."

"What brooch?"

"Chambers," said Sante, "I'm advising you now as a lawyer. This kid—this Jack Medford—will break once the police begin to question him in earnest. If you deny now, you'll be in terrible trouble later. You're a smart guy. A caper can go kaput. I tell you, as a lawyer, if you repent and withdraw right now, if you cooperate, if you tell your story here and then you tell your story to the Grand Jury, waiving immunity—if you produce that brooch or tell us where it is—I guarantee, as a lawyer, nothing will happen

to you. At worst, a suspended sentence. At best, and much more likely, not even an indictment."

"What brooch?" I said.

"I didn't pass anything," said Jack Medford.

"What the hell goes here?" I said.

"They're back on their broken record," said Santee.

"Was a diamond brooch passed to you?" said Parker.

"Care to frisk me in front of these witnesses?" I said.

"How stupid do you take us for?" said Santee. "You'd be an idiot to have it on you now—and you're no idiot."

"What brooch?" I said.

"Come with me," said Parker.

He led me to Penelope Arlington's bedroom which he seemed to have established as his private office. The bed was made. Penelope was no longer there.

"What's with a brooch?" I said.

"We're going to book your boy," he said. "We now have motive."

"What took so long? Is this the brooch-bit that was broached out there?"

"We couldn't touch anything until my experts showed up. After they did their photographs and their fingerprints and all of that, we could move, inspect. You know?"

"I know I know. So what's with a brooch?"

"Motive for murder. A brooch worth two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. How's that sound for motive for murder?"

"Sounds grand. Two hundred and fifty grand. But how does it apply?"

"Miss Arlington was a rich woman."

"So?"

"A tremendously rich woman."

"So?"

"She owned an enormous amount of jewelry. In the millions. All insured, but in the millions. Most of it she keeps in her vault."

"So?"

"On her trip up to the country, she took only one piece. A brooch. A diamond brooch. A diamond brooch with more karats than a hutch of rabbits can eat in a lifetime."

"Very expressive, Lieutenant. Worthy of General Generoso."

"Don't be flip, Peter. Generoso is a fine cop, despite his college-trained didoes."

"Didoes? Where'd you pick that up?"

"From Generoso, where else?" He grinned, but unhappy. Parker was troubled.

"Hooray for the generous Generoso. Let's stay on the brooch."

He moved to the dresser. "Today, when they came back from the country, she took the brooch off and placed it into this drawer." He pointed to the upper right-hand drawer. "The maid—Mrs. Monet—witnessed that."

"Where is the extraordinary Mrs. Monet?"

"Downtown being cross-questioned on her sworn statement."

"Everybody make their statements?"

"Oh yes, signed and sealed. May I get back to that brooch, please?"

"Please."

"When, finally, our experts were finished, and we were able to look into that drawer—"

"I get it," I said. "No brooch."

"You get it," he said, "and according to Santee, you've *got* it."

"I get the whole deal now, including motive. What you're hot to tell me is that while Arlington was sleeping—"

"Your boy, poking around, opened the drawer, saw the brooch, and copped it."

"That's larceny, not murder."

"According to Sandy Santee—the old dame woke up and squawked and he got scared and stuck her."

"That's according to Santee. What about—according to you?"

His sigh came from way down, practically rattling his prostate. "Peter, your boy was found with that knife in his hand. That other guy, that Peabody, we couldn't even have proved that he was here, except that he himself—by his own admission, mind you—told us. The fingerprints on the knife turn out to be Medford's, of course, but *only* Medford's . . ."

"And fingerprints—on the drawer of the dresser, the drawer that contained the fabulous brooch . . . ?"

Concern wizened the corners of his eyes. "We've got a little trouble there. It's a trouble that's been explained . . ."

"Frankly, pal, you don't look too happy about it."

"Frankly, pal, I'm *not* too happy about it . . . which is why Peabody and Santee are still here."

"So let's hear, pal. First, please, the trouble. Then, please, the explanation. I offer my services as a sounding-board, Lieutenant."

"Listen, Pete, and listen good. My experts worked out two items on the knob of that drawer."

"Yeah man," I said.

"They worked out a smudge which *could* have been done by a finger. And they worked out a *clear* fingerprint."

"Whose?"

"Michael Peabody's."

"And it's *my* boy that you're going to book."

"We're not yet excluding the other, but for your boy—just listen." He was not happy, but he was honest, and he was efficient.

"I'm listening," I said somewhat deferentially.

"One—he was caught red-handed with that knife in his hand. Two—only *his* prints are on the knife. Three—we now have reason and motive for the murder. Four—the smudge on that dresser drawer could certainly be his print, only it got smudged. Five—Michael Peabody has given a reasonable explanation for his print being on the knob of that drawer—"

"Hold it, please."

"Yes?"

"Santee is accusing me of being in cahoots with Medford?"

"Yes."

"That Medford copped the brooch and when I got here, passed it to me?"

"Yes."

"Then if you please—may I personally hear Michael Peabody's reasonable explanation for his print being on the knob of that drawer?"

"Sure?"

"This reasonable explanation is now a part of his sworn statement?"

"Of course."

"May I hear, Lieutenant?"

"You're entitled." He went out and came back with Peabody and Santee. "Mr. Peabody," he said, "tell Mr. Chambers about the flowers and stuff."

"Why the hell should it be repeated to him? Who the hell is he?"

"Michael," said Santee. "Cower not at truth. Be good. Cooperate with the esteemed lieutenant. Tit for titty, as the saying goes. Admittedly, we *have* accused Mr. Chambers of a certain complicity here—purely as a matter of conjecture, I must add—but we *have* made certain conjectural accusations and, under the law, under the time-tried precepts of our great and hallowed Constitution, the accused has the right of confrontation by his accusers—"

"Sandy, kindly cut the bullshit if you please," said the Pea. "It makes me dizzy."

"Then don't be difficult. When I don't want you to talk, you talk your goddamned head off. When I ask you to talk—"

"Okay okay. What do you want me to talk?"

"What the goddamned lieutenant—pardon me—what the lieutenant has requested."

"You want to hear about the bit with the fingerprint on the knob of the drawer? Is that it, Lieutenant?"

"If you please," said the lieutenant.

"Well, like I told you. When I got here, she's sleeping. She wakes up and we shmooz around, talking. Them flowers there—like all of you can plain see, including the peeper—is all the hell wilted and there's petals all over the dresser, dropped from them poor wilted flowers. Well, I happen to be a neat guy, always *have* been a neat guy, it's part of my make-up, part of my nature. So, while we're shmoozing around, making with the chop-chop, me, I'm kind of cleaning up them petals which has fell. I'm shoving them into the cup of my hand, you know? Shoveling with one hand into the cup of the other—"

"Pea," I said, "what in hell does that have to do with your print on the knob of the drawer of the dresser?"

"Peeper," he said, "why don't you hold your water?"

"Mr. Chambers," said Santee, "this recital is at your behest. Common courtesy would dictate that you do not interrupt."

"My courtesy is uncommon and all forms of dictators—"

"Peter," said Parker, "shut up."

I shut. Up.

"Well," said Peabody, "that drawer wasn't firm closed, if you know what I mean. It was like pulled open a few inches. Me, I'm cleaning up there, brushing them petals into the cup of my hand, and some of them fall in, into that part-open drawer. So I pull open the drawer—"

"And you discover a great big diamond brooch."

"I didn't discover nothing, Mr. Peeper. I wasn't looking for nothing except some of them loose petals which I brushed in there. Anyway, I take them out, and dump the whole heap into the incinerator. So like that it figures that maybe a print of mine shows up on the knob of that drawer."

I said, "You have his sworn statement on that, Lieutenant?"

"Of course."

"What about his prints on the incinerator-handle?"

"No clear prints. Smudges."

"Thanks," I said.

"Anything else, Mr. Chambers?" said Santee.

"Nothing else, Mr. Santee," I said.

"Mr. Chambers," he said, "once again I advise you to make a clean breast, now, while there's time, before they squeeze it out of Medford, and any confession on your part will be too late—"

"Get them out of here," I said.

They were got out of there and Parker and I were alone again.

"You don't think I'm mixed in this, do you, Louie?" I said.

"Of course not."

"But Medford?"

"He's admitted that he's in need of money—"

"So just like that he murders a woman who's befriended him."

"No. We don't think it was premeditated. We haven't begun to pressure him yet, we haven't pressed for any admissions, we haven't put on any heat. But our figure is he came in when she was sleeping, mosied around, found that brooch, and she woke up. Even a kid like that can realize the tremendous value of that bauble. If he can get away with it—he's set. He doesn't have to depend upon anybody for money. He can take his time about passing it—maybe even getting expert advice—but once he's passed it—he doesn't have to worry about money again for a long, long time. Once he's out of there with that brooch, he can even say he never got there. He puts it away in a safe place and he's got a hunk of stuff that he can change up for independence. He doesn't have to beg or borrow any more for his . . . his artistic independence. *But the dame woke up.*"

"So he kills her?"

"What else? Suddenly he sees himself free and clear for the first time in his life. He doesn't have to depend on his father, he doesn't have to depend on rich old dames, he doesn't have to depend on egomaniacs who want bronze busts of themselves—he's free and clear and independent—an artist. So he slashes."

"Which presupposes he had a knife on him."

"Why not? Lots of kids carry these knives today. And even you can't say he was unacquainted with them. By his own admission—and yours—he ran with a pretty bad crew in his time."

"So what did he do with the brooch?"

"Santee believes he passed it to you. It's Santee's theory that that's why the kid insisted upon your being here before he'd loosen up with a word. Santee believes it was passed to you before we had any idea that it was missing."

"And what do you believe?"

"That once he had it, he went out with it somewhere and got rid of it quick. Then he came back here to try to clean up on the

knifing deal, and the maid showed up. He's a kid. He's a sculptor. He's not a hardened crook. He's inexperienced in crime. He freezes —and then the best he can do is play it out dumb. And he's got plenty of time to think up a story while he's waiting for you. He says he picked the knife up off the floor—"

"But it could be true, damn, can't it?"

"Only *his* prints on it, Pete."

"So? Isn't it possible the hilt was wiped before it was dropped. Peabody is *not* inexperienced in crime. And there's even a reason why he left the knife. As he's informed us, Miss Arlington told him that Medford was due. If Medford is caught here with that knife . . ."

"Peter, we don't have one damned thing against Peabody, plus that shyster is here protecting every flank. We've got to tread carefully as all hell. Actually, we don't have any right to hold him, and Santee has been playing it cool and supposedly cooperative. Just between you and me—I think he's waiting for us to make a slip. Any statements that we get out of Peabody that are in the least irregular—will *not* be admissible in a court of law as proper evidence. I've been playing it cool right back at Santee. Oh, I haven't ruled Peabody out, not by a long shot—"

"Then why don't you get rid of that Santee?"

"What sense? He'd tell Peabody to clam, and then, with his connections, he'd have him out in an hour on a writ."

"Have you searched Peabody's room at the *Brittany?*"

"We don't have the right. Without a search warrant, it would be illegal entry. Again, any evidence we turn up like that—illegally —would be tainted evidence."

"Then why don't you *get* a search warrant?"

"It takes time, and Santee would get wind. He's already made a few outgoing calls, and has already received a few calls. He's got connections deep in the Department. The minute we'd start putting in for a search warrant, he'd get a call on it, light out, and—under power of attorney from his client—go to that room before us and take out, or throw out, anything incriminating."

"How do you know he hasn't already done that—through confederates—as part of his phone calls?"

"That stupid, I'm not, Pete. I've got a cop standing outside Peabody's door to report. No one has gone in, or attempted to go in."

I lit a cigarette. I said. "Can you get in touch with that cop?"

"Of course. I've got a radio car sitting right outside the hotel."

"Fine. You'll get a call through to that radio car with a message for the cop at the door."

"Message?" He started as though I had turned a key to his ignition.

"A message that when Peter Chambers shows up that cop is to knock it off, to go away, to get lost."

"When *you* show up? Now what the—"

"I take it that both Peabody and Medford have been searched for that brooch?"

"Both volunteered."

"Natch, and of course there wasn't anything incriminating on either of them. Now, Pappy, I know that my kid is telling the truth and I'm *positive* that Peabody is lying."

"Positive, are you?"

"And I'm going to accentuate that positive, Pappy. Remember when you sent that cop after Mike the Pea? You yourself told me —and Peabody corroborated—that he'd hardly just got there, still had his hat on his head, when that cop came a-calling. Okay. Since I'm *positive* he's lying, then I'm certain he had that brooch on him. I'm going to prove that, and I don't need any search warrants, and I don't have to worry about some shyster screwing up the works with legalistic firecrackers. Now, please, here's all I want you to do. Hold them all here—give me a fifteen minute start. Then let Michael Peabody go. Oh, he'll go—he'll *fly!* But hang on to Santee, on any pretext—just for five minutes. Then all of you come down to the *Brittany,* come visit Michael Peabody, and you won't need a search warrant, Pappy. It'll just be a social call."

"Pete! I don't—"

"Pappy, I beg of you—trust me. I've known you for a hell of a long time. I've never put you on a spot yet, have I? I wouldn't for all the tea in China and all the hash in Mexico and all the pot in Greenwich Village. And I won't now, I promise you. It's only that you're the law and the law has to play it by law or else it gets mangled to uselessness by such mechanics of the law as the likes of Santee. Well, I'm not the law. I'm a private citizen scooting around playing at cops and robbers, and I can play it by ear. Please, I beg you, comply with my simple requests, and then cross your fingers, cross your toes, and cross whatever else you've got that you can cross. Bye now, Pappy, Wish me luck."

And I was off on my scooter, playing at cops and robbers.

TWENTY

I MADE A fast stop at *Ye Olde Fleur And Flowery Shoppe* where I purchased corroboration for my theory and six red roses to be delivered to Topsy Twits for her apartment and one purple orchid to be delivered to Topsy Twits for her person. I was pushing hard on two fronts, Parker's and Topsy's, and Topsy's front, of course, was far more delectable. On this latter front I was at long last being subtle, at least that was my good intention (although we all know what the road to hell is paved with). I was trying and I hoped against hope that she dug. A masochistic twist of my weird psyche had sundered a sunny relationship and had sent me scampering from a gal whom I was nuts about and I was now attempting to reverse the scamp by laying a beseeching wreath upon her blooming altar. The fragrance of six red roses was foreign to the odor of autobiography—and I hoped she understood that—which was the reason for the orchid. The purple orchid was to serve as symbol: if she wore it when she came to visit at nine o'clock—autobiography or no autobiography—I would have my token. So much for Topsy's front, God bless it.

On Parker's front I hastened to *The Brittany,* self-serviced the creaky elevator to Six, sauntered to the lolling cop near 606 and sideswiped from the side of my mouth in regulation croak-and-digger tradition: "Peter Chambers. Parker sent me. Goodbye." He saluted as though I too were in uniform, wafted off to the creaking lift, and was whisked away.

I paced that ancient corridor as though I were an anticipant daddy and 606 was the maternity ward. It was hot and unventilated and I worked up an unwanted sweat. There was no chair or bench but there was, at either end of the corridor, a telephone booth, in one of which I sought cramped sanctuary disguised as a hunched-up appurtenance attached to a phone receiver. I sat, spine-curled and eye-cocked, sweating profusely, awaiting the pop of the expected Pea. This was to be the crux of the crud, one way or another. He had invited me to combat often enough and I had resisted it as a waste of time but now it was business and I was

looking forward. Could be I would have my head handed to me. Could be—but if I could not handle the likes of the Pea, big as he was, it was time I retired.

The elevator screeched the start of its climb and I came unstuck from my seat—not for the first time—knees tense and thighs taut and waiting, but this time was my time. Mike the Pea, intent upon swift entrance into 606, flew along that corridor as though he had a tail-wind behind him. Tail-wind or no, he had me behind him, tippy-toe but fairly fleet, and just as he opened his door, I took off in a flying tackle. Half in the room, half out, we scuffled. No word was said. He recognized me and his grin denoted his satisfaction. So did mine, mine.

He was strong and he fought dirty, a combination which can be lethal, unless you are strong and you fight dirty: then it is even up. For a while—grunting, panting, punching, biting—that's the way it was: even up. Once, his knee, sharply accurate, shot to my groin, and I fell back almost helpless, and the tide surged in his favor and almost drowned me, but a last-effort lucky gouge at his eyes set us back to even again; silently, except for the involuntary sounds—grunts, rasps, expostulations of pain—we thrashed about in a vicious bout of no-holds-barred; and then I was down on my back playing it cute and he leaped in one last deadly effort but he forgot to cover, his jaw was exposed, and the heel of my shoe caught the point of his chin, and he toppled, flat, supine, rattling for breath and semi-conscious, his head in the room, his legs in the corridor, and I crawled over him and seized his golden hair in my hands and knocked the semi out of the semi-conscious by a judicious pounding of the back of his head against the hardwood floor. He lay still. For a few moments, I rested upon him. Then I pushed up, straightened out, pulled him in, closed the door, dug deep for breath, and then jollied about the room, seeking, and I did not have to seek long. His dresser was nothing like the ornate ash-wood affair of Penelope Arlington—it was decrepit, stained, and peeling—but it also had a right-hand top drawer, which, when I pulled it, revealed a gleaming outsize diamond brooch smack-dab-centre where in his hurry he had dropped it. I clucked in admiration and he groaned in returning consciousness, and upon this muted duet came a resounding rapping upon the door.

"Who is it?" I called.

"Louis Parker."

I opened the door to him, Santee, Medford, and a spate of coppers. "Well, well," I said. "What brings you?"

"Purely a social call," he said grimly affable.

"Well, come in, come in. Your host is somewhat asleep."

Parker shunted off the cops, excused himself to Medford, and he and Santee entered. I closed the door behind them and flashed the brooch. The gleam brought a beam to Parker and a blast from Santee. "What's that?" demanded Santee.

"The brooch of the Lady Arlington, I'd say," I said.

"Where'd you get it?"

"Found it right here in your client's drawer."

"You did, did you? You're a trespasser here. You know that."

"Sandy, go pull your legal shenanigans somewhere else. I'm no trespasser, heaven forfend. Your comatose client practically dragged me in."

"I did like hell," said the client crawling out from comatose and coming up to his knees.

"A plant," said Santee. "Smart-aleck clever but it won't work. Chambers, you're a cunning operator—my hat is off to you—but this gambado is as transparent as bad toilet paper. You get yourself caught in the switches so you try to straighten yourself out. The jig turns out to be a jag for you and Medford, so you try to work out a cute angle. You come here with that damned brooch, attack my client, plant the brooch, and so by implicating Peabody, you think you can extricate Medford and yourself."

"That's it," said the Pea from the floor. "He attacked me, slugged me from behind. Thanks for laying it out so neat, Counselor. Gimme a hand up, huh?" Santee helped him to his feet. The Pea came up sweetly grinning. He was not unintelligent. He caught on fast. "How do you like that phony bastard, huh? Trying to lay in a plant on me."

Parker looked baffled. I didn't blame him.

"It's not going to work," I said.

"You *bet* it's not going to work," said Santee. "Lieutenant, I demand that you confiscate that brooch immediately."

I gave it to Parker and Parker confiscated.

"Lieutenant," said Santee. "I now demand that you arrest this man. Unless you do—right now at once—then I accuse you of being derelict in your duty and I assure you that I shall personally bring charges to that effect."

Parker, at long last, threw the weight of his badge against the burdensome legal badgering.

"Sandy," he said quietly and with all good manners, "kindly shut that big trap of yours and try to keep it shut."

"I object," said Santee.

Parker sighed. "Overruled."

I said, "May I make a statement in this courtroom?"

"Sure. Make," said Mike the Pea. "Make statements. See what good it'll do you. Furthermore, I don't know about anyone else, but I wouldn't believe no statement of yours if it was stacked out on a set of bibles."

Petulantly I said, "But your statements are true-blue, Green Pea, aren't they?" Parker frowned at me, uncomprehendingly. I disregarded him. "Aren't they, Mike?" I said.

"You bet your ass they are."

"Like the statement you made as to how your print got on the knob of that dresser drawer at Miss Arlington's apartment?"

"You bet your ass."

I turned to Parker. "You *do* have that statement?"

"Signed, sealed, sworn, and delivered."

"Good. Because that statement together with the brooch you're holding—they're going to fry this pea in the electric chair."

"Now look, phony bastard," said Peabody, "don't try to mix me up because nothing will help you. I told my story and I swore to it and nothing will help you because nothing can mix me up. I told about them flowers and I told about how my print came on that drawer. I told how I cleaned up them petals from the orchids and gardenias. They was from last week, all wilted, you saw yourself. Some of them petals dropped in that drawer, I pulled the drawer to take them out, and that's how that print got on there."

"Keep right on talking, pal," I said. "You're killing me. Better yet, you're killing yourself."

Santee's squint held utter incomprehension.

Parkers squint held incomprehension but it also held hope.

"I don't quite get it, Pete," he said.

"Just talk to any florist and you'll get it."

"Get what?" said Santee. "Lieutenant, this man is obviously stalling. I don't quite understand his game but—"

"Get the facts," I said, "that there's a certain special feature about gardenias and orchids."

"Special feature?" said Parker.

"Neither gardenias nor orchids shed their petals regardless of age."

"What?" said Parker.

"What?" said Santee.

"They wither—yes. They wilt—yes. But shed their petals?—they simply do not. Consult, if you please, any florist."

"Liar, liar, goddamned liar," shouted Peabody but the fury was

so manifestly the wrath of guilt that even Santee withdrew behind a rampart of defensive silence.

"Come on," said Parker and took Peabody's arm.

The party was over. The fight was finally out of him. He went as though being led on a leash but the exit march was marred by a new fanfare of trumpeting from the brassy Santee.

"I object to these high-handed proceedings. I shall charge police brutality, connivance, Gestapo inquisition, Cossack cruelty, terrorizing tactics . . ." And he rotated the entire rote of shyster-demagogue disquisition, subsiding at last from sheer fatigue.

"Are you finished?" said Parker.

"Yes I'm finished," said Santee.

"So's the Pea," said I.

"Die," said the Pea.

"Let's go," said Parker.

The party was over.

TWENTY-ONE

THEY GAVE me Medford and I didn't know what to do with him. He said he was hungry, so we went to eat. I congratulated him upon how things had worked out, and he congratulated me for having worked them out. He said nothing about his father, nothing about the hundred thousand dollars, nothing about the New York National. He said nothing. Silently, his dark eyes lowered, he ate —badly. He had said he was hungry but he picked on his food like a pigeon. I talked. I didn't stop talking. I talked my damned head off. I told him about Peabody's background; I told him about Hockin Chynik, Maximilian Bartlett, Angelina Pisk; I prattled like a college girl back at the sorority house after a date with the football captain, but I said not one word about Charles R. Medford. What could I say? How could I break it to him? And why me? Once a boy came through with newspapers and I grabbed wildly hoping the paper would do my job for me but the story had not yet broken. Then he put down his fork, pushed away his plate, looked at me steadily, said quietly, "My father's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes," I said.

"Please tell me."

I told him, and I watched him grow up right there before my eyes. His early scrape with the police had yanked him out of a frivolous boyhood; now the death of his father released him into manhood. I told him, told him all of it, including the fact that I was overdue at Generoso's. He listened gravely. He gulped once or twice but subdued any other sign of emotion. When I was finished he looked up, off somewhere, said tonelessly, "What a way to die." Then his eyes came back to me, clear, without tears, and he said, "I want to thank you for everything, Mr. Chambers." Before I could shake that off he said, "You've had it rough, sir. Real rough. Rough finding him. Rough having to tell me." And before I could shake *that* off he said, "I'll go with you to Lieutenant Generoso."

"It's not necessary, kid. I can handle it."

"Thank you, but you've done enough. They want you there, they want your statement—all right. But after that—you've had it. I'm the son, there's no one else, I'm the only next of kin. There'll be a million matters to attend to, and I'll attend to them. It's a hell of a deal, Mr. Chambers, a damned hell of a deal and it hurts like all hell, but somebody's got to face up to it and there's only me, and I want to be sure—dead sure—that nobody puts my father in a wrong light, not the police, not the newspapers. I thank you for everything that you've done, Mr. Chambers, but from here on in, I'm in charge."

I could not say "I'm proud of you, kid" because corn cloys at my throat but I wished I could although it would have embarrassed both of us. I said instead, "All right. You're in charge. But if you need me you know where you can find me."

I paid the check and took him with me to Generoso and Generoso was a new man. It had finally come home to roost with him that roasting me was foul ingratitude. Not only had I personally presented him with a sensational murder case—which was certain to hit all the wire services with attendant publicity adhering to him (all cops, loving, pretend to hate it)—but I had also delivered the murderers to him without desire or claim for credit (all of which would accrue to him). Mulling that must have dulled the edge of his innate acrimony. And now with a good portion of his staff out looking for Jack Medford, I arrived with Medford in tow.

So, once again, I was a mild hero, milder than earlier that day but sufficient for a small show of cordiality, a saving from insult, and a granting of attention without the dispiriting hitch of undue delay. I dictated a full affidavit, answered some innocuous questions while it was being typed, signed it when it was returned to me in neat typescript, and received a welcome "Thank you" of dismissal from Generoso. Once more I told Medford not to hesitate to get in touch with me if he needed me, and then I got out of there and started shaking it off.

In my business, if you stay with tragedy you yourself must become a victim. Nervous breakdown is part of the occupational hazard. Battle fatigue is the peacetime ailment of the private richard because in his racket, of necessity, he is always at war. I learned early to shake it off, to turn away, to block it out, to shunt it off, to pull the shade, to have done with it, and thus far my system had kept me from rattling in and out of the loony bin. Case finished. Next case. To hell with death. We all must die. Early in my career it had been tough but in time I had learned and pat-

terns had formed habit and habit, of course, inhabiting all of us, is the rudder that steers our way.

First step in the shaking off was a whack at wassail. I chose a fancy tavern because I was ordering a fancy drink—champagne cocktail. I was to be a wine drinker this night—I hoped—and I don't believe in mixing the marriage of drinks. A second cocktail chased down the first and then I chased out of that fancy saloon and bolted for home in the next step of the shaking off, or the taking off. I showered and prettied and rolled on all the deoderants and sprayed on all the colognes and pulled on a lover's uniform of tight black slacks, slim black loafers, and a white silk sports shirt with flowing collar, puffy sleeves, and pearl buttons (but sporting, man). I dredged up two tall silver ice-firkins for champagne (Christmas presents, what else?) and slipped in the cubes and laid in two imported bottles of the giggle-water and bubbled with hope that the giggle wasn't on me. Oh, I would know soon enough. If she was wearing my purple orchid, I was in. If not, my six red roses had delivered no message and my orchid was cold in her icy box. I turned off the harsh white lights and turned on the rosy encouraging lights. I set out graceful long-stemmed drinking glasses. I heated up the stereo and I had just about laid the needle to the groove for lush music, when the bell rang. She was early—good! She was anxious—so was I! It was a quarter to nine! And so to the rhythm of the music I danced to the door, flung it open, and got stuck in the middle of my bow of welcome.

I was host to Alfred Surf.

I groaned. "What are you, a poltergeist?"

Pushily he pushed in. "A what?"

"Look, did you pay me five thousand dollars for an option to haunt me?"

"Oh, a *polt*ergeist." He grinned. He was flushed with whiskey or excitement or both. He looked about at the encouraging lights. They didn't mean a thing to him. He was encouraged without the encouraging lights. "Pete," he said, "I've just come from a conference with my lawyer."

"What happened to your party?"

"The hell with my party. Pete, do you think that Barry Howard is going to get out of that felony-murder rap?"

"Like hell he will."

"Exactly. Exactly what my lawyer said. That felony wasn't over when Mr. Medford appeared at the office of the Nigle Realty Company. That felony was right in the middle of its being com-

mitted. The fact that Howard wasn't present when the girl killed Medford doesn't mean a thing. He's as guilty as she—"

"Alfred, did you come here to give me a lecture on law? Lectures on law I don't need."

"But you told Howard you weren't sure."

"What did you want me to tell him? That they're going to sit his ass down in the electric chair? Let his lawyer tell him. He'll find out soon enough."

"Pete, do you realize what we've got here?"

"Alfred, some other time. Please go away."

"We've got a real major best seller! We've got a Last Chapter that wraps it up better than any thriller I've ever heard of, and it's fact, fact, man, not fiction. We've got the collaborator bringing the protagonist to book and all unwittingly—"

Professional pride piqued, I said, "All unwittingly, hey?"

"No no. No offense. I only mean that you didn't actually know that *he* was the protagonist. Kid, we've got something big here, *big;* we've got a sensational book that's also actually a parable, a morality tale; sin gets it in the behind in the end. Oh, I intend to go all the way on this one. I'm going to budget it with the largest budget that I've ever budgeted any advertising campaign. I've got big plans, baby, *immense* plans. And oh by the way, look what I brought you."

"Not now, Alfred."

He produced a check. I didn't fight it. Paramount rule of my profession (and all other professions): you don't fight checks. The amount was precisely the amount of the check earlier in the day—five thousand bucks. He produced some kind of receipt. I didn't read it. I signed it. Funny, from morning till now I had worked at my business with a good amount of success and I had not earned a quarter, yet I had acquired ten thousand fish because of two flukes: the fluke that Surf had chosen me as collaborator and the fluke that Howard had turned out to be the guy who had batted me on the head at Nigle Realty

"Peter," crashed the Surf in crushing enthusiasm, "we're going to rock 'em, we're going to sock 'em, we're going to knock them dead. But now, first, we're going to talk about that Last Chapter, the *creme de la creme,* the *piece de resistance.* We're going to work on that with the utmost of care; together we're going to build that, we're going to *build.*"

"Alfred, please, not now. Pick up your blocks and go away. We'll build another day."

Suddenly he saw the champagne, firkin-chilling. Suddenly he saw

my attire, pansylike adagio-type. Suddenly he heard the music. And suddenly he made a modicum of sense. "Peter," he inquired, "did I bust in on something?"

"Topsy Twits . . ." I began but he misunderstood.

He was back at his stint snorting again on the runaway steed of business. "Look, I'll throw her into the deal. You're hot for her? Okay, you've got her. Never let it be said that Surf didn't toss in, or toss up. or toss, a woman in the interests of a best seller. Look, I'll tell her that you're *her* collaborator, and that you have *all* the say, and that I do or I don't do her book depending upon *your* decision. There's no book to do, of course, but what the hell, her attentions will be transferred entirely to you . . ."

The bell rang. I opened the door.

I did not bow. I stood erect but irresolute.

Topsy Twits swept in and bestowed a smile upon Alfred Surf. Surf tried to return the smile which gave him the peculiar expression of a gargoyle because his mouth was already open in a bewildered gape. Always the gallant host and never at a loss I said something like "Hi" but it came out so low it was unheard.

Topsy Twits wore her hair braided in a new Oriental do. Her black eyes were burning. Her white teeth were glistening. Her red lips were shining. Her feet were encased in high-heeled silver pumps and her body was covered by a billowing silver cape tied at the neck. She gave off a whiff of a strange musky perfume which kept me erect but turned me more resolute.

"Oh Mr. Surf," she trilled, "I'm so glad that you could take the time to be here so that we can all discuss together . . ."

"Mr. Surf," I said, "was just leaving."

"Ah, er, ee, yes, eh, yes, yes, just leaving, just leaving. my dear. I have an appointment, ah, er, ee, with my lawyer, eh, yes with my lawyer, must go, you know, so good to see you, my dear, so good indeed." And then a mumble that almost killed it: "Oh that Peter Chambers . . ."

Sharply I said, "What?" He had done so well, I couldn't let him spoil it.

"Must go, must go, must go indeed. Then I'll see you tomorrow, Peter. old Peter, old Machiavellian Peter."

"Mack the who?" said Topsy Twits.

"Mack the Vellian," I said. "Like Mack the Knife. Mr. Surf composes songs among his other accomplishments."

"I'll see you tomorrow about the lyrics," he said. "Yes? Early."

"Late."

"But why late?"

"I expect to be tired."

"You expect to be . . . ?" But he let it lie and fairly scurried to the door and woebegone was gone.

Softly she said, "I tried to be polite but I'm so glad he didn't stay."

"Why?" I said, my Adam's apple contracting to a squeeze of cider in my throat. That perfume was something.

"Thanks for the flowers," she said.

"You're welcome," I said.

"I love what you're wearing," she said. "It's so . . . so masculine."

"It *is?*" Each to his own. "I love what *you're* wearing," I said.

"But you haven't even *seen.*"

"What I *see* is lovely."

The sloe-eyes glinted with quick mischief and a slow smile was wicked on her mouth. Nimble fingers untied the neck-noose of the cape and it fluttered to the floor and I almost fluttered to the floor on top of it. She was wearing a silk silver-flowered geisha-type dress and nothing else. Nothing else could possibly have been compressed beneath that sheath of silver silk except her skin. Please remember that Topsy Twits was a famous specialty dancer with a body to match. Please remember that Topsy Twits had a figure that had launched a thousand flips. Please remember that Topsy Twits was tall and tawny and measured, as well advertised, 36-23-36. And remembering all please try to imagine, without bursting your seams, Topsy Twits in a high-necked shimmering geisha-sheath that clung like an ambitious leech to a full-blooded mammal, with slits up the sides and no stockings yet. And to top my climax the purple orchid, like a purple heart, was pinned above her left breast.

I stumbled away to the champagne and popped a cork. I poured into long-stemmed glasses and we clinked and we drank and then we set the glasses away and we danced to the warm music and I nudged the lobe of her ear with a kiss and she nudged the lobe of my ear with, "Remember, we're going to discuss."

"Of course," I said. "What else?"

And so we drank champagne, and we danced, and we nudged our lobes, and then we sat around for the rest of the night discussing *Topsy Of The Twitching Twits.*

Yeah.

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